



come with me...

INTO the WOODS

a monster anthology

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There's a path that runs straight through the village,
But it stops at the edge of the wood.
It halts at the borders between worlds,
For beyond, there lies nothing of good.
Hushed whispers all speak of what haunts there,
In the brack, in the depths of the fen -
The creatures both monstrous and gaunt there,
Not the village's hale, hearty men.
But cradled in claws in the shadows -
Something kindles like flickering fire -
As hammering heart howls to run,
Something deeper stills, caught by desire.

—Poem by Vera Valentine



MADLINE JANE

I thought breaking up with my ex would be the worst part of my day. Turned out I was very wrong. Instead, I marched my cute little plaid-covered butt into the woods to escape. Then I was attacked by demon-looking creatures in a magical realm.

I was saved, or kidnapped, depending on how you look at it, by a strong, yet, kind of sexy, massive green monster called an Orc. Which leads me to the tremendously scary, grumpy, and ready-to-*mate* chieftain Brizor.

Could I really find my happily ever after with a monster from getting lost in the woods?

CONTENT WARNING

There is a tiny bit of light somnophilia (sexual action going on while one party is sleeping...but the sleeping party will be very happy about it), sex with a monster, graphic sex and language, and chasing.

CHAPTER ONE

Brizor

"You're getting slow in your old age, Chief," Dereg, my younger brother, taunted me while shaking off warm water from the lake, and then tossed the carcass of the fish he just ate at my head. "You only beheaded ten grozhis before we broke our fast. Do you bother to sharpen your tusks or claws anymore? Or are you ready to crawl into the dying pit with the other angry, useless lot? I think your axe got more action than anything else. You're losing your touch."

He wanted to fight; that much was apparent. His blood was still hot from the hunt. With no available females in our village to court or fuck, we sparred a lot, but my brother always fought with a smile, unlike my permanent scowl.

No matter what species, younger siblings were assholes, and mine was no different. I didn't bother looking up as I left my sunny rock and charged him. Even wading through the water, it only took him seconds to discover the depth and tear of my tusks into his shoulder. As usual, he needed to learn a lesson, and I would enjoy letting out some pent-up frustration.

"Fucker." He laughed, aiming a fist at my face. I tilted my head to the right to soften the blow, while sinking my claws into his thigh at the same time. Among the blood and violence, he had a good time. I couldn't help but enjoy myself too. He was the only one I could fight like this. Anyone else, and I'd take it too far. Most of the village males wouldn't attempt sparring with the chief, but Dereg saw me as his brother first and leader second. He would never cross me in public—our parents raised us to know our place in society—but in private, it was the same as when we were younglings.

I had him locked in place with his face shoved under the water. I pulled him up by the nape of the neck for an answer. "Do you yield?" He gave me a smile as he tried to bite my thigh with his sharpened tusks, but his move lacked conviction, so under he went again. Thrashing about, he finally tapped out. I let him loose and allowed gravity to do the rest. I headed back to my sunny rock with new blood to clean then as he swam to the surface.

He picked up our conversation from before the fight. "I don't know why the grozhis were so plentiful this season, but they are wreaking havoc on the crops and are too much of a danger for the younglings." They were vicious bastards that could kill one of the younglings if they were caught alone. The Fae never wanted to deal with them. They'd simply use their magic and send the beasties our way.

"Something is driving the grozhis out of the mountains. The Nagas, like the ones we killed among the beasts, would be the obvious reason, but we need to send a search party to see what is happening. There may also be something the Fae haven't told us about as well."

I'd rather hunt down a Naga than set up a meeting with one of the Faes. They talk in riddles, and it always ends with me attacking someone. Mother told me I was the worst diplomat in the village, but I was the best at making them squirm, thanks to my intimidating size and demeanor.

The only similarity shared with our Fae *cousins* was our delicately pointed ears. Unlike us, they could glamor away their fangs and tinted skin, and could even turn into animals or look completely human. We, unlike them, were a pure brute force, thick muscled, forest green-skinned, and made for hard labor, which was how we liked it. Sitting on toadstools enjoying stolen treasures and finery, made my eyes roll. However, we all had our responsibilities in the world. They were in charge of the seasons and keeping magic out of the hands of humans by keeping the barrier stable, while we

maintained the magical creatures and killed the monsters that came out of hiding.

"Nagas would be easier to handle. They're smart, but are still predators born to kill. My coins are on the Fae holding a half-truth. I don't get their secret ways, but it would be useful if they warned us of new dangers." Dereg sighed. Nagas were nasty serpents that camouflaged themselves to escape and feast on lost human flesh. If the one we had chased hadn't been so greedy and stopped to eat the animals, he might have made it, but lucky for us, he wanted to gorge. Fighting him and the wicked teeth of the swine was what had me bloodied up and washing in the warm pool.

"The problem could be something with their magic." I looked over to my brother. We all felt the difference in the magic around us, and the fact more monsters had been getting closer to breaching the realms meant something.

Despite the sunshine and warm lake, there was a terrible snowstorm in the human realm just beyond our protected border. The hot springs were excellent for healing, and the waterfall stirred the magic about. That was one thing that made most Orcs occasionally bitter, though, we had too much work to even think about it most of the time. We didn't possess any magic. I supposed our ability to quickly heal and instinctively know our mates the moment we saw them could be considered magical, but if anything, it was out of necessity.

Once mature, we would typically meet our mates from another clan or village of forest creatures. It was almost unheard of to be mated to someone in your own village or another Orc, because Orc females were a rarity, but on occasion, it happened.

Nature and the mating bond helped make the best matches for happiness and breeding. I was a male in my prime, nearly thirty rotations, but I'd yet to discover my mate. I thought for sure at the last gathering that one of the matured females would be her. There was a beautiful ogress with a deep moss complexion and glossy red hair with a sweet ripe rump that called to me, but one look at my buddy, Zemef, and they were headed to the nearest cave to claim each other, and like that, all my feelings of interest for her vanished. The next day, she returned to our clan, joined him in his wood cabin, and added the rings through his nipples and the large gold band at the base of his cock, symbolizing he was mated.

The only visible adornment I wore besides my leathers was the cord with the fang of my first kill as a youngling around my neck. That night, my mother beamed with pride as I presented her with meat for dinner.

Males were known to fight near-death over an unmated female to get her attention. The mated males and leaders had their hands full at the gatherings. But as soon as a male found their mate, they never looked at another. Mates were more than somewhere to bury an aching cock. You shared your life with them, home, heart, and younglings. I saw how my father doted on my mother, bringing her the choice pieces of meat, surprising her with shiny baubles, tenderly caring for her if she were ill.

My mother was a rare Orc female, but she would have still only bore orc children if she had been any other creature. Our blood was strong and bred above any other. He sought her advice on matters that weighed his mind. They both worked together to rear my brother and me, and trained us to fight. The females we mated with were far from delicate. They often focused on crops and teaching the young, but they were tall and muscular in frame, built to handle the needs of their males. We weren't gentle. If the way I took my cock in my hand to find release and spill my seed was any indicator, my female needed to be strong.

My thoughts flooded with how it would feel to have a warm, inviting body under me as I lazily

washed over my wounds. The loud flow of the water drowned out all other sounds, including my brother, who was laughing his ass off. It wasn't until he threw a small stone at my knee that I looked up with a glare.

"Brizor, brother, stop before I have to see anymore. Take that to your home and tend to it." His laugh only deepened as he nodded his head toward my rock-hard cock that was leaking seed. I quickly gathered my soft washing fabric over my lap since my leathers were on the dry ground, grumbling out curses. It had been too long since I'd found release. Not much stirred me, but maybe it was a blessing since almost every moment of my day was taken by a task or labor. He continued to goad me on. "Maybe you'll stumble across a nymph in the woods." I rolled my eyes, knowing no such thing would appear. *The all-allusive nymph that satisfies your every sexual desire then disappears. That would be the day.*

"A nymph would be preferable to my duties today. I'm meeting with the Fae prince before the sun is at its highest. Which means it's up to you to lead the hunting party and clear out the rest of the hordes hiding."

"Consider them all dead. The storehouse will be filled with meat and the tannery with hides. That would free up some time for you." He began walking toward the water's edge to prepare for his second hunt of the day. "I don't envy you, brother. Use your head more than your fists during your meeting. I know they are infuriating." I held my hand up before he could continue.

"I know what must be done." Thoughts of the Fae and court filled me with annoyance. All the need that had coursed through my body was gone.

"I wasn't questioning your leadership. They like to play dirty mind tricks, and there is information that needs to be found out..." He paused, thinking about his words before continuing. "And you can't beat it out of them." He scowled, probably remembering the snarky little Fae messenger that disrespected me and ended up leaving without a tooth. The thought made me warm.

"Agreed. I'll see you after the council meeting this evening. I still don't know why Father passed down his chieftom in trade for the council leader. I can see it in his eyes that he'd rather be fighting than discussing."

"Aye, I was being serious, you know. You need a nymph or maybe just some time with your hand. You've been grumpier than normal. Orcs need to spread their seed. Keeping it bottled up isn't healthy. Now that you're a chief, I'm certain you will find your mate at the next gathering, but for the love of all the gods, at least get your cock wet before then." The vulgar gesture he made was clear.

"Nymphs don't exist, and you damn well know there are no females around here that are available."

"Fine, then go on a goodwill trip. Take me and some of the unmated orcs"—he lifted his brows—"to visit one of the nearby goblin, elf, or ogre villages. Being a new chief would make for an excellent excuse. It's been too long for all of us males, brother."

It seemed like a horrible idea to take frustrated, horny males to any village with women, but I could keep them in line, and gods know we could all use a warm body.

"I'll think on it." It was a simple and curt response, but one that earned me a mischievous grin as Dereg ran off toward the village.

I growled at my cock, taking in the state of it, before deciding I didn't have time to care for my needs. I had too much work and a conniving Fae prince to meet.

Someday, I'd find my mate. She would be strong, a leader of females, worthy of my seed, and

sturdy to birth sons. For all that she will give, I will give more and make her my queen.

But for now, I'd have to find the Fae portal the prince had set up for our meeting. A purple toadstool shouldn't be that hard to find.

CHAPTER TWO

Madeline Jane

I slammed my car door, pulling my sunshine yellow coat tighter around me amidst the heavily falling snow. "Babe, come back; this isn't you. You know I love you," my now ex-fiancé yelled as I marched off out of his miserable sight onto the road's shoulder. We were in the middle of nowhere. "Madeline Jane, come on, you are being completely ridiculous. It was just that one time." I wanted to believe him, but even my brain gave me the side-eye. *One time, my ass.* "She's just an intern who was there one night." This wasn't the wisest decision I'd ever made, making Dean pull over on the side of the road in the snow, but I was blinded by rage. Rage was a new feeling for me, and I didn't particularly like it.

As we had been driving to a romantic getaway up in the mountains, his phone had chimed with a text. I'd looked into the cup holder and was greeted with a pair of tits and a skank sucking on her finger, trying to look innocent. Under the *fabulous* picture, it read: *Dean, I can't get the image of your hard dick sinking into me over and over out of my head. You've made me so happy. Come back to my bed, baby...*

I hadn't bothered reading the rest before lowering the window and throwing his phone out of it. He'd slammed the breaks and looked at me in horror and shock. "What the fuck, babe! Have you lost your damn mind?"

I'd then proceeded to yell in what could only be described as *demon speak*. Because I never said things like that. I wasn't even sure what I'd said, except that it was full of anger and pent-up rage. I hated arguing. I hated confrontation. I hated anything that wasn't happy. I liked to call myself an optimist, but today was different. Today, every dark feeling I ever had came out.

I supposed I should have been happy he kept his eyes on the road while driving and didn't crash when I started throwing things. Then again, he probably wasn't expecting his side chick to text him at three in the afternoon.

All the signs were there.

He'd been working late, seemed stressed, distracted, and had taken to calling me *babe* over the last few months. Nothing wrong with endearments, but I'd always been Maddie, and he'd never been in a rush to get off the phone with me. He'd blamed the competition among the other junior associates fighting for the now open senior position as the cause of everything strange.

Then came the fighting. First, it was about the wedding, then the house we were looking to buy, and finally our future kids. The last issue was the one that hit me the most. I wanted a huge family. I was an only child with a bad relationship with my parents. *I was sure I helped pay for my therapist's vacation home.* Out of nowhere, he'd said he didn't want any. The lifestyle he'd envisioned wouldn't be suitable for children, and he didn't want to end up resenting them for holding him back from his dreams. *This wasn't the guy I first met.* It was that fight that had me bawling and for him to book this vacation to show me how much better it would be for just the two of us.

With all his bullshit running through my head, I hissed, "*Babe*, we are over. I can't stand to be around you for another minute. Take your teenage-looking whore on vacation." I quickly pulled off my glove to pelt my engagement ring at his ridiculously-shaped head through the window. I was starting to notice everything about him that pissed me off. The list was growing as I decided to really get away from him and foolishly walked into the forest, so he couldn't follow with his car. I don't know

why I was shocked, but he didn't try to stop me. He didn't even unbuckle his seatbelt. *Selfish bastard.*

Stupid me kept trudging further into the woods, muttering profanities. I felt like Snow White as the animals popped their heads out from trees and brush to look at me, then go about their business. At least I didn't have some huntsman on my trail ready to cut out my heart. *Quit being morbid.* I didn't know how much time had passed. It couldn't have been that long since I wasn't freezing to death yet. I pulled my phone from my pocket to find it was only three-thirty in the afternoon. I had a full battery, but no bars. Time to turn my stubborn ass around, follow my steps and head back to the road. I knew there was a gas station not that far back.

All I had to do was turn around and retrace my steps. Okay, well, that plan got shot to hell when an adorable white rabbit darted out in front of me with a little brown fox on its trail. Oh no, I couldn't stand to see the little bunny become dinner. Circle of life and whatnot, but just no, not today. I grabbed a stick from the ground, shook it into the air, and took off at full speed toward the little brown fox, who clearly thought I was insane. It stopped mid-run to stare at me. I swear that it turned its head and laughed. To further prove it wasn't scared, it walked up to me and walked through my legs as if it were a cat. *It just rubbed its scent on me.* Then with a look up at me, it not only walked off but practically bounced.

In my valiant effort to save the sweet-looking creature, I went further into the woods, where a fog appeared. Clutching my stick as if it could do anything, I took a few steps forward into a rising mist. Between the fog and new falling snow, I couldn't find my footsteps to retrace my path. I wandered aimlessly in what I thought was the right direction, but couldn't see anything. I pulled out my phone as I came to a clearing in the woods that hadn't been touched by the snow, however, I went the wrong way because I would have remembered a snowless patch of land. My screen was black. No matter how many times I tried to turn it on, it was useless. I couldn't help but walk further into the snowless land. It fascinated me. I stuffed my gloves into my pocket, then I unzipped my coat. The warmth felt so lovely that I couldn't help but walk further on.

The sound of water caught my attention, and I looked down to see a little stream. Maybe it would lead me to some little subdivision because with my every eight-week platinum blonde highlight appointments and bi-monthly mani/pedis, I wasn't exactly a wilderness girl, but I wasn't *too stupid to live* either. I just needed to find my way somewhere to make a call. I wasn't an ogre, so surely someone would open the door for me and let me in. Then I could go home, get my feelings together, and start my new life without Dean. Everything was going to be even better than before. Since I knew what to look out for in men that cheated.

It's okay that my life wasn't exactly as I thought it would be at twenty-seven. I had a fantastic job as an online creative writing instructor for the local community college, which meant I lived in a fictional fantasy world most of the day and recommended good books. I had my own money, apartment, and friends who would commiserate with me. Well, not really friends I'd ever met, but online book club friends. When I took my job in the biggest city in Wyoming, I became a bit of a recluse. But, it was all going to be fine.

My heart skipped a beat in excitement when I heard murmurs. *This was all going to be over soon, and I would be safe.* I quickened my pace when I heard low voices talking off in the distance, but the noise of the water was getting louder. As my feet pounded into the hard grass-covered earth, I began to yell, "Help. Is someone there? I'm lost. Please help me." The faster I ran toward the voices, the hotter I got. The stream was widening as I got closer to the source. *Was that steam coming off the*

water? I hated to sweat. I flung my coat over my arms as I pushed up my red buffalo plaid sleeves and unbuttoned the top button of my shirt dress.

Today, I wanted to feel extra pretty, so I wore a warm button-down flannel buffalo plaid dress with a belt that made a darling bow at my waist that accentuated my *padded* hourglass figure. I went from freezing to wanting to strip. It hit me that I must be near a hot spring, which would explain the weather difference. Maybe there was a resort nearby. This shitty situation could turn into something spectacular.

First things first, stop jogging and slow down. I used my coat to blot the light sheen of sweat that formed on my brow and upper lip. Next, if this was a resort, I could make my newly single self a little more presentable. Stopping next to the water, I tried to find my reflection. I bent over, jiggling my girls a little bit higher into my bra, and unfasted my top three buttons. One of the perks of being a curvy woman was cleavage. I gave them an extra side squeeze to perk them up. I pulled the tie from the end of my braid and then unleashed waves of blonde hair. *I felt so good about my new life adventure that I blew myself a little kiss in the water and wiggled my hips a bit. I was about to have a good time soon.*

Perhaps, I might seem heartless for not crying over just calling it quits with my ex, but mostly I was just pissed, not so much at him, but at myself for knowing something wasn't right and still letting it prolong. If our fight over children the other night wasn't bad enough, last week over dinner, as he droned on about his workout schedule and how I should make one, I considered launching my fork at him.

It wasn't the first time he told me what I needed to work out or get a dietitian to better myself. *Fuck him.* I loved my body. Later that night, I played with my big tits as I got myself off, and not once did I imagine it was him. *No, I pictured a sizable sweaty body that covered mine completely. Dean certainly didn't have the width or muscles to do that. Instead, in my mind, two large rough palms pried my legs open as broad shoulders worked their way between my thick thighs. I imagined murmurs of adoration and appraisal as the mystery man licked his lips in hunger. Swollen fingers pushed into me while an eager wet tongue licked and sucked my clit until I exploded...*

I clenched my legs together, trying to stop the wet heat that was beginning to pool in my core. *Sheesh, MJ, reign it in, woman.* Yeah, our relationship was headed down a bad road, but it seemed fitting to say yes to his proposal. We'd been dating for over a year, we were both climbing closer to thirty, so marriage and babies were the natural progressions. I wanted the baby part more than I wanted him. We weren't a match made in hell or anything that drastic. We were more like two people sharing a pleasant space.

I was sure my cheeks were flushed as I walked closer to the voices, but I doubted anyone would notice if they were relaxing in a spring. I walked a little slower, adding a slight sway to my hips. I followed the water until I was standing under old tall trees. My view was blocked by large boulders and overgrown bushes. It was as if nature was working hard to keep this place a secret.

Before I could make my grand entrance to whoever was on the other side, I heard what sounded like hooves galloping, and the ground began to have a slight tremor. I heard squeals and low-pitched voices before I saw a hairy devil-looking little beast flashing fangs and beady red eyes running straight at me. They looked like demon-possessed pigs. Before I could take off or scream, I heard a thump and saw something from the corner of my eye fall from the tree I was standing under. I found a frightening enormous green man—no, a monster—with lower fangs, looking at me and then he started

laughing as I began to scream.

"No grozhis is going to make you dinner on my watch, tiny human." I felt a massive arm wrap around my waist and unceremoniously throw me over his shoulder. "I like my females fleshy." He smacked my ass as he took off in a run to the left. "But you, my lovely one, need some filling out."

"Dereg, you're taking her?" a voice questioned, keeping up with the pace. Both ignoring my pleas for help and wild thrashing to be let go. "Gods, you should have thrown her back into her realm."

"Of course, I'm taking her. I can't remember the last time a human crossed the barrier. Also, Brizor and the council will need to see." He quit talking and sniffed me.

"I'm not a dessert to be sniffed and eaten. Put me down and let me go. People will come looking for me." My words only made him laugh. My captor was quite jolly.

"If I let you go right here, you'd be eaten alive by the grizhors. Though you'd be a boney dinner for one. And I smell Fae on you."

"What do you mean, I smell like Fae? What the hell is that?"

"You smell like faerie magic. Since you aren't a little pixie yourself, you've crossed paths recently, and I have no doubt they played a dirty little trick sending you into our territory. I'm not putting you down. Cross any unnaturally beautiful people or animals?" He was very final in his declaration.

"She does smell like them and their sweet summer berries," said one of the others. I couldn't see how many were in this little horde.

"Are you kidding me?" If I were to believe this incident was real, then maybe that little fox was more than a fox. *Damn it.*

"Aye, she's thinking about everything she's come across today, and I think we have a winner," a younger voice added. "All right, take her to your brother and see what he has to say, and then we will take her back."

"I like his idea," I added since I didn't particularly want to be eaten by the pig demons.

"I'll take you to my wise ruling brother," He chuckled again as if it were a joke. "But I'm not sure I'll take you back, though. I rather like the look of you. I haven't found my mate, and all unmated females are many days' travel away. Maybe the gods have sent you, little one, to warm my bed and ride my cock."

"I guarantee there will be no cock riding, especially for you." I was firm in my words. Though it only made both monsters laugh. "And what kind of creatures are you? Ogres or trolls or something?" I was trying to think of storybook characters.

He laughed. "Aye, you should be glad we are none of those ugly beasts, even if they have fair enough females."

I heard a growl followed by another voice I'd yet to hear. "Watch it, Dereg, my mother's an ogre."

"Get the wax out of your ears. I said the females were worthy. Now, as I was telling our visitor... We are the mightiest and most handsome of the lot. We are Orcs." I was sure he wanted to slap my ass again but, for some reason, refrained and began running faster through the woods.

I had until my feet hit the ground to figure out how to get away. These Orcs were too big for me to overpower and too fast to run away. Which meant I would have to outsmart them and find my way back to civilization.

CHAPTER THREE

Brizor

I paced around the circle of councilors as I told them of my meeting with the Fae. Prince Zephyr insulted me with tardiness, then spoke in rhymes, trying to confuse me. After all our time in the realms, the Fae treated us as incompetent animals and yet should know better. I decided to play the part as I cursed the old language and threw my axe at one of his servants. The little winged creature nearly shit himself before he scuttled away. That story made the council laugh.

"After rounds of nonsense, he dismissed the rest of the court and asked that my attendants leave as well. Once alone, Zephyr admitted that there had been problems since the death of his mother and others in his family line. The fact that neither he nor his siblings had found mates, and had yet to have heirs, meant the royal magic was declining. With the weakening of their magic, they are having issues controlling the wall between worlds." I explained, while stomping around the circle in aggravation.

"Yes, a likely reason the monstrous animals moving south and closer to the humans," my father interrupted before I could say the same. "They could feel the shift as much as we could, even if they didn't understand. Their instincts must have told them there was less danger and more food. Did Zephyr share how they plan to remedy the problem?"

"All he told me was that they are considering several options. He offered to send soldiers to the barrier to keep constant watch, but I told him we were handling the problem. I don't think any of us want that much interaction with them so close."

"Very true," Alehor, one of the oldest members of our clan, answered. "They tend to their business, and we tend to ours. Nothing changes. Is there anything else of importance we need to tend to?"

Many of the elders said no and began to rise. I grumbled, thinking about Dereg's words. "Yes, I do have one more matter to discuss." Those who'd stood took their seats again. Father lifted his brows, not sure what I would say, and I could tell this amused him. My brother took after him in that respect. "It has been brought to my attention that a goodwill convoy to the closest villages might be in order to introduce myself as the new chief." The idea of being social made me scowl and grumble, apparently out loud, since the room erupted in chuckles.

"By your face, son, this was not your idea." Father smirked. "I smell Dereg and some very lusty Orcs in this plan."

Scrubbing my face with my hand, I nodded in reply.

"If you want to have merriment and show off your power and position, you have our blessing, along with some of our accompaniment. Our mates will enjoy traveling and visiting old friends," another elder spoke.

"Thank you. I will think about this and get back to you." I nodded in respect as they began to leave.

That's when we heard the cheers and yells from the outside. It must have been the hunting party returning. They were hot-blooded and in need to release the excitement of the hunt. I could already imagine the fighting that would take place all night. I'd be judging the brawls until the sun came up. There had to be a winner and a loser with each round. The noise passed and went further into the village. They must be taking the kills for preparation.

I wasn't expecting to hear Jorgen's voice outside asking for permission to enter the council hut.

"Enter," I boomed.

"Chief, come quickly. Dereg's captured a human," he whispered. If he was telling it as a secret,

that meant most of the hunters didn't know.

"Where did he take the human?"

"Your cabin, since it's outside the village."

I didn't need any more information before I shoved the smaller Orc out of the way and took off running. Good gods, what was my brother thinking, taking a human. We were bound by honor and the gods to protect them. Fury gripped my senses at the idea of having to behead my good-natured brother for breaking our laws. I'd beat him for putting me in that position.

When I reached my dwelling, he met me outside the door with a smile. I felt the beast in me rise and take over. "Brother, I've sent the rest away. Did Jorgen tell you of my findings?"

My fist went into his smug face and my knee to his cock. His eyes bulged with pain and anger as he crouched from my unexpected blow. "What in the gods names is wrong with you?" he snarled at my attack, bringing his claws up in defense.

"I thought you'd be pleased," he huffed out in pain. I took him down into the dirt as we fought. Ripping his arm with my tusk, I pinned him to the ground, finally stopping all his movements. "I saved the female from the beasts and brought her to you. Well, I was going to bring her to the council, but she's a wild thing throwing curses and anything she could get her hands on. I told her she was not in danger with me, but she kicked and thrashed as I brought her into your home. She's out cold because she hit her head on the entrance's sturdy wood. For her own safety, I laid her down and tied her up so she couldn't hurt herself again. I covered her eyes like you would a spooked horse as well, just to be cautious." As I relaxed my grip, he took the opportunity to throw me off and rise to his feet. I was quick to follow.

"Tell me more." I was asking for him to speak, but all I wanted to do was break down the door.

"Shit, Brizor, your eyes... You look crazed. I was going to tell you the entire tale, but your temper denied me more words. You are a nasty brute, you know that? Yes, somehow, she broke through the barrier and into the horde of grozhis we were hunting. I saved her before she was trampled and eaten." He moved closer to whisper, "She's a beautiful creature with plump teats and rump. Not to make her think too highly of herself, I told her she needed more flesh and to be fattened up to please us. I want to keep her."

I placed my hand on the door and focused my senses on the sweet smell of ripened apples that covered the entryway. With my nose to the wood, I growled low in warning for him to back away. A female. A delicious temptress that had my cock hard and uncontrollably leaking seed down my thigh, and I hadn't even laid eyes on her. *Gods above and below, there was only one reason for this.*

I didn't bother looking as I spoke since I was half-crazed, and began licking the spot where the scent was strongest. "Have you lost your mind bringing an unmated female into the village." It didn't matter that my voice grew deeper and louder, drawing others out of their cabins. "Those lusty beasts will fight and kill for the chance to carry her back to their homes and devour her."

He was either brave or foolish for pulling me forward and standing up against me. He sniffed the air and narrowed his eyes, inspecting me. When he took note of my jutting hardness under my leathers and spilling seed, he grinned. "Poor Chief, go take your prize. I don't envy your task tonight fighting that"—he pointed to my cock—"and her. How will you ever get that beautiful striking Naga to submit and be consumed. With what you have planned, I suppose we should all be thankful your cabin is outside of town."

"If anyone touches her or looks at her, I'll rip their hearts out and eat it for the others to see." I

sneered.

He opened my door and stepped further away from me. "I leave you to it then. May the gods be with you on this night." The bastard winked as he moved out of sight, and I walked into my dimly lit cabin, closing the door behind me. All I had to do was walk and get my hands on my mate without scaring her. Human females were tiny by comparison, so I had to be gentle. She'd feel the bond as soon as we laid eyes on each other.

Her scent drove me insane, making my seed thicken and weep. She wouldn't know the importance of it. How it would soften her to prepare to take my cock and ripen her to breed. I needed to fill her and coat her as much as possible to ensure she enjoyed our joining. Orc seed was what allowed us to mate with other creatures, otherwise the size difference could hurt a female such as an elf, Fae, or human; though it was an oddity for us to bond with a creature so small.

I walked through the main room of my cabin. On the back wall was an unlit fireplace, across from that were the table and chairs, which had a lone lit candle. I don't know what Derig was thinking. He should have given my mate more light so she could admire her fine new home. I'd deal with that later; first, I had to find her. I doubted he would have put her in the washroom or the room I built for my future younglings, so I quickly went to my bedroom. It was closed and quiet. She still had not awoken.

I didn't know what to expect when I opened the door, but it certainly wasn't a flaxen-haired creature blindfolded, and tied up lying on my bed. *Gods, she was like an offering.* She was in a red and black tunic that had ridden up her thighs, nearly exposing her cunt. I wanted to plant my face between her sweet heat. But that, along with her legs, were covered in thin pants and boots. I hated those pants. Her hands were bound behind her back, which pushed her creamy plump breasts up and out of the tunic. If I popped a button or two, I'd be able to see the color of what were sure to be hard, perfect nipples. I'd never seen a human, and certainly never a naked one. I could imagine her rounder, full of milk with our young one suckling. Her body was still. I was entranced watching the rise and fall of her chest. She looked calm and peaceful, failing to match the willful creature Dereg described.

Knowing she would soon carry my youngling made my cock nearly rip my leathers. I untied the cord on the side and freed myself, though I didn't let my leathers fall to the floor. I needed some relief or else I'd rut into her like an animal. Slowly, I pumped my shaft from base to bulbous tip, and spread my cum all around as it splattered on the floor. If I was taking care of my needs as normal, I'd either spill in the basin or outside, but I needed to save it all for my mate. Covering myself again, I walked to the head of the bed, my hand coated in white liquid. I couldn't help myself as I gently rubbed it over the swells of each of her rounded bosoms. Marking her with my scent felt like a weight was lifted, but there was still some smell on her that made me growl. I reached down to pick off a lock of her long golden wavy hair. Breathing it in, all I could smell was fresh apples and spice as I did at the door. It was intoxicating. As I continued down her body, it was the same until I came to right above her boots. There was the offensive odor—the sickly-sweet smell of the Fae.

Without thinking, I tossed each boot off, then using my claws, I ripped those strange pants to shreds. I'd have to burn them. I wanted the smell gone, and I wanted her awake. *I needed her awake.*

To pass the time, I fetched a bowl and filled it with warm water from the washroom along with a soft cloth and the special mint and lavender soap my mother made. She said even if I never used it, I needed to have niceties for visitors. I brought these back to my sleeping mate and began to wash her feet and legs. It didn't take much to remove the foul smell.

I was lost in my mate. I needed to cover her body with my essence and claim her. The frenzied

monster that dwelled deep within me was taking over. I had one goal with this round-bottomed goddess in front of me: breed her.

I needed to see more of her. Her body called to me, and I needed to touch her skin to mine. I ran my claws down her tunic, ripping and revealing more soft, smooth flesh. I ripped through her bindings since she would be safe with me. Careful not to cut her, I used the pads of my digits to caress her skin. Everywhere I touched, she broke out in cold pricks of excitement, making the hot scent of her cunt pulse with juices. *Only her mate would be able to focus on her need to be fucked.* The air began to permeate like a rich apple cider that made my mouth water. I'd been told that all mates smelled differently. I wanted to gorge on her.

Now on the bed, I crawled down her body. I used my lower tusks to rip the second layer of fabric that covered her pink-tipped luscious breasts. I never knew that pink could become my favorite color. She lacked all the shading of an Orc, but she was still beautiful. Even a Fae would have a broader spectrum of hues. None of it mattered since she was my human, my mate, and my responsibility. She would never want for anything. As my mouth and tongue continued exploring lower past her soft belly, I worked her nipples. There was still one piece of silky fabric covering what I wanted most, but for the moment, I left it. I wanted to savor the moment when her dewy cunt came into view. Would it be pink like her nipples, would it have hair like an elf, or be bare like the Fae? I groaned, thinking of all the unknowns.

As the buds hardened between my thumbs, I impatiently waited for her to arouse. Surely, this would do the trick. Her heat and scent told me her body was priming itself to take me. She continued to grant me little moans, but when her hips bucked off the bed, seeking purchase and into my hard barely covered cock, I spurted out a flash of white cum all over her thighs. I rubbed it in to further the preparation process. Visions of her growing belly made me crazed.

I was caught off guard with the sweet breathy, "Mmmm. Yes. More," that burst from her lips. Her damned eyes were still closed, but she knew her mate was there and wanted me. Pride swelled my chest at the thought that our connection was already strong.

Tonight started our forever, so I might as well wake her the way I intended from now on, with my lips wrapped around her pleasure nub and my tongue deep inside her. I'd had many years to consider how to be a good mate, and the one secret I knew for a fact was that in private, females demanded their males to kneel. I would happily oblige.

CHAPTER FOUR

Madeline Jane

I could feel my lips moving with words of praise. I was warm, wet, and about to scream out an orgasm. *Did all head injuries result in orgasms? Who the fuck cares? I'd had a hell of a day and was going to enjoy this.*

My eyes opened to a smooth wooden ceiling. Glancing around, I noticed I was in a warm wooden cabin, but my focus wasn't on my surroundings but the way my body was on fire. My nipples ached as though they were being kneaded, deep desire pulled in my belly that was met with a solid weight, and my clit throbbed with demand. I don't know if I'd ever craved a cock the way I was at this very moment. All I knew was that my pussy was empty and needed to be filled. Not just filled, it needed to be stretched and abused. *Oh. Yes.* What I wanted went past need and into the realm of pain. I could hear myself pleading for release.

"Shhhh, I know what you need." Low deep words of reassurance rumbled over my soaking wet panties just above my clit, further thrumming my desire, but I hated them since the words took away from the warm heat on my needy pussy. I felt shoulders widening their stance between my thighs as the hot latch of a mouth and tongue began working me. *Yes.* I wanted to cry in relief from his touch. I wanted my damn panties gone.

But that voice? I recognized it. He was the one screaming about devouring me and ripping hearts out. He was dangerous.

Didn't matter, he smelled like my favorite pumpkin pie, and his mouth was going to shatter me. I was starving, but my hunger was for him. My hands went down to the sides of the black fabric; I really couldn't remember which pair of panties I had on, but I was praying they were sexy. Either way, I started rolling them down my hips.

My hands were knocked out of the way by larger ones. His eyes met mine, and they danced in delight. "Now I can please you properly," he said with confidence. Sharp black claws sliced through the fabric, which he then threw to the floor. "Ahh, beautiful." He ran his long fingers down my smooth mound. *I gave in to peer pressure and sent my pussy to Brazil, even though it hurt like a motherfucker. Never doing that again.*

"I'd love to know what properly feels like." My voice was coy and playful. The monster's eyes locked with mine, and I knew I was in trouble, the best kind of trouble. Lust and want filled me, but so did a fierce possessiveness. The thought of this green Orc pleasing any other female made me see red.

He tilted his head as if in thought. "What's wrong, little human?"

"Nothing. I'm fine," I said it too quickly, and even this monster understood the bullshit behind those particular words. I sat up, leaning against the headboard. I could feel a fight coming.

He fully pulled back and sat on his knees. With a raised eyebrow and stern voice, he continued, "Do not lie to me, mate. I felt your body tense, and your scent changed to anger. Why?" With his thick muscular arms crossed over his heaving chest, it was clear he wouldn't back down without an answer or resume his task of pleasing me.

"Fuck it, I've gone psycho. Seeing you like this, despite being a total stranger and further proving I'm having some mental breakdown and going crazy, the thought of you"—I took a deep breath before admitting the next part—"doing this to anyone else made me want to get violent. I felt jealous of

women I'd never met." Those seemed to be magic words because a broad smile crossed his face, followed by a deep rumble in his chest.

"Have no fear, my little mate. This is my first time kneeling."

Before I could respond, he pushed me back into the bed and dove, leaning on his forearms and planting his mouth firmly on my aching core. His firm lips sent a strong pull on my clit. I felt the building burst of pleasure through my body, shutting all remaining thoughts. A long rough tongue slipped through my juices and folds; the sensations alone were causing my body to slicken as I'd never felt.

Raising my head and looking down, I saw a giant, clawed hand circling and toying with my right nipple. How that razor tip wasn't cutting me with every lazy circle had me more entranced than the fact I was pinned below someone green that made me feel possessive as fuck. I began to shift onto my elbows to see more of the hulking body between mine. Watching him work was beautiful and made me wetter. The lazy circles stopped, replaced by a quick flick that hurt the over-sensitized bud, but nearly sent me spiraling into an orgasm.

That would have been a first. It took a lot to get me off with a man. I was like a fucking ancient puzzle box that took a secret code, prayers to the gods, and a virgin sacrifice. Now, me, myself, and a handy dandy toy from my drawer took about two minutes for a sweet little release. However, it was never anything to journal about. Even when I got myself off the other night while pissed at Dean, it didn't come close to what that nipple flick just did.

I was dying to see what his leathers were covering. He was gigantic, and I had no doubt his cock would match. I only had visions of riding a big green monstrous cock to completion, and for some reason, everything in me said I was going to get just that. Fully sitting up on my elbows, I took in the mess of shiny black hair that was pulled into a cord at the nape of his neck. Beyond that, all I could see were ropes of thick muscles. His shoulders and back were corded thickly and moved in a mesmerizing row as he voraciously ate my pussy as if it were his favorite meal.

Noticing my movement, he stopped and looked up. His beautiful face was chiseled to perfection. Sharp lines and angles were enhanced by his neat black beard and long bottom fangs, or whatever his people called them. The surface around his mouth and beard was glistening. Without taking his eyes from mine, he licked every drop of my arousal from around his lips, then groaned in satisfaction. *Fuck me, that was hot. I was happily going to fuck a monster. A mean, deadly monster, and I didn't care because this was the best experience I'd ever had. Take that, stupid cheating ex, with his stupid human dick and useless tongue.* I was getting giddy by the second, and this creature loved my excitement.

"Don't you dare stop. I want more," I yelped in one quick breath.

"Mate," was all he said. *Whatever the hell that meant.* His strange orange iris was overtaken. His pupils went nearly black as he moved his hands from my breasts to under my ass and brought my core to his mouth. With a devilish gleam in his eyes, he tongued my asshole, causing me to gasp. Then he began using his wide wicked tongue to lap his way through my opening, juices, and back to my clit. I could feel myself losing control and earnestly began fucking his face. Something in me snapped, and I couldn't get enough of this creature. He eagerly took in each glistening coat of juice on his face, burrowing his face further into my folds. In the insanity, I wanted to be covered in him as well.

"Is this real, or did I hit my head so hard I'm having dream sex?"

He stopped and looked deep into my eyes. "This is every bit real. My goal is to satisfy you. I need

to prepare you to take every inch of my cock and fill you with my seed."

"Well, that's rather intense. Though, I do like the satisfying part. The men I've been with never really cared about that," I said, snorting in disbelief. *Oh boy, he didn't like that comment.* He gnashed his teeth, then let out a roar. After that, I was a little shocked he didn't beat his chest and throw something across the room like an enraged animal.

"I am no man. I am an Orc. I am Chief Brizor. I will protect you and care for your every need and desire, my mate. You will scream in pleasure and beg for only my cock." He walked the line of arrogance and confidence, but so far, he proved he had skills to satisfy. Fascinating that the chief knelt between my thighs, giving me such intense pleasure. Logically, I should have been horrified to wake to the scene, but I wanted it. In fact, I think I would have been severely pissed if I wasn't naked and under this Orc. Everything about him made me frantic. Somehow, between our few words and bodies, I felt a deep connection to him than I ever did with any other men. We belonged to each other, mind, body, and soul.

"I don't know you, and you don't even know my name, which is Madeline Jane, by the way. Why do I want you so badly? I should hate you and your people for taking me, for waking up naked with a stranger buried between my thighs, but I'm not. For some insane reason, I don't want to be anywhere but in this bed with you."

He moved up my body to kiss me deeply. I was able to tilt my head just enough to where the tusks didn't get in the way. He pulled my face closer to his, flushing our bodies together.

"I knew you would understand and feel the mating bond as quickly as I did. We were destined to be." He stood up from the bed and untied his leathers, letting his kilt-type cover fall to the floor, baring his gloriously naked body to me. His arms, his abs, and thick thighs made me drool. But what made my mouth drop in both excitement and fear was the giant ridged and pierced cock that jutted out in front of him. He licked his lips while stroking his shaft up and down, staring at my naked body. I couldn't take my eyes off the two straight barbels that crossed at the tip. I'd never been with a man who was pierced, but dear me, those two bars and four silver balls did things to my pussy.

"Do all Orcs have piercings?"

He ran his thumb over the silver studs. "These? No. I did it for my mate's pleasure. I'd been told the females enjoy it greatly." *Holy shit, he had been planning to fuck me, well, his mate, for a very long time.* "Tomorrow or the next when we have had our first fill of each other, there will be a celebration, and I shall receive my mating piercings here." He pulled on each of his nipples. "They will place the gold band here." He squeezed the base of his cock. "With my leathers on, it will still be visible that I am mated." He was proud.

"Wow. That is commitment. Um, do I have to get the same markings?" *Please say no, please say no!*

"No, I shall make a ring for your finger. The pain of the piercings is for the males as another way to prove our strength and ability to protect. Does that please you?"

"Yes." I was mesmerized by his actions and answer. I would have never believed this vicious monster would pride himself on pleasure and protection of his female.

Not taking his eyes off mine, he rubbed his shaft, spreading the thick, well, goo, all over himself for lack of a sexier word. It poured over his fist as he stroked himself up and down. I wanted to lick every drop, and I was a woman who HATED the taste of cum. I would do anything to keep from sucking any man I dated, probably since they rarely did it to me. But this was not the time to think

about that. No, this time would be different. *But the size difference. I was terrified.*

"Have mercy on my soul for saying this, but there's no way, no matter how wet, stretched, or determined I am, that beautiful massive cock with all its bells and whistles is ever going to fit without splitting me in two." I thought for a moment because I needed more from him, and the way precum was freely flowing and spattering on the floor showed he was just as bad off as me.

He looked hurt. "I would never hurt you. Even when you birth our younglings, I will be there to take away your pain."

"Seriously," I began before he interrupted me. *That was sweet, impossible, but sweet anyway. Men will lie to get you into bed. I guess Orcs do as well.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Madeline Jane

He said, "This," as he took his wet cum-coated hand, rested it on the top of my mound, and rubbed it all over my pussy through my folds, over my core to stop and massage my tight back ring, "will prepare you. It's how Orcs can mate with others." Brizor did the strangest thing and started biting his claws until there was nothing but smooth blunt nails. He gave me a roguish smile. "Can't hurt my tender mate. Dereg will enjoy making fun of me, but he will have no idea what he is missing." He gave a hearty belly laugh that caught me off guard, but was contagious. I had no idea what he was talking about, but he seemed extremely happy. He began stroking his shaft; he had no idea how I wished it was my hand making him leak cum.

He covered his fingers again and used the other hand to make shallow thrusts into my tight wet channel. His one digit continued to fill my opening. I moaned with each movement of his finger. I could feel my body trying to pull him in further, but he resisted. He leaned down and gave my clit a gentle kiss when he seemed happy with his work before moving his soaked fingers to my breasts. He kept his hands coated as he massaged each mound. He added to my pleasure by pulling and twisting each peak. *How much of this stuff could he make?* Again, he finished with a kiss but this one to my lips. I threw my arms around his naked shoulders, moving my head to deepen the kiss.

His large hot body rubbed against mine. Every inch of me was covered just as I had been in my dream. This monster was everything I'd dreamed of, which made me want more. I gave his shoulders a squeeze along with his hips, signaling I wanted us to flip over. Keeping hold of me, he obeyed my wish, and I was on top in seconds.

He blurted out, "Wait, your body is not ready."

I silenced him with my finger. "I have an idea, just relax and let me play." I crawled down his body until I nudged his thick thighs apart and settled in between. He looked ready to ravage me. My hand seemed small as I tried to wrap it at the base of his green cock; good heavens, my fingers didn't touch when I wrapped my hand around the base. *I, for sure, needed this magical cum that made everything fit.* From the base, I moved my hand over the swirled rugged ridges that looked and felt like a thin raised braided cord under his skin, wrapping from his dark green base to an angry pink bulbous head. I was getting wetter, with images of it sinking in and out of me. It had me coming undone. The idea of the sparkling silver balls hitting my G-spot was short-circuiting my brain.

After a few pumps, I was ready. Our gazes were locked with each other as I began to slowly lick the rounded head. Immediately cum poured onto my tongue. *It was sweet, spicy, and pumpkin? How the fuck did his cum taste like creamy pumpkin pie? Never mind, I wasn't going to question the universe. I was going to say thank you and properly suck his dick.* From that moment, I lost all inhibitions and went wild. I was lapping, sucking, slurping, and moving both hands in that fabulously twisty motion at the base to mid-shaft. To my surprise, the more I swallowed, the more he fit down my throat. *It was magic.*

Brizor's grasp ripped the bedding he had been holding. I knew he wanted to grab hold of my head and take control. He was fighting his nature as leader. He groaned and praised me, "Madeline Jane, I'm going to spill. Be ready, sweet one." His body went rigid, and then he unleashed. What he had been releasing through the evening was nothing compared to the hot thick spurts that shot out of him now. It was savage. I tried to keep up with every swallow, but couldn't. It ended up dribbling down

my chin and onto my chest. We were making a mess, but neither one of us cared. We were too lost in the moment.

When the last drop was spilled, I felt his gigantic hands grab hold of my hips and hoisted me onto his chest. He leaned up to kiss me before dragging my pussy onto his face. Using his tongue, he lapped at my opening. His hands came up on both of my ass cheeks to spread them, giving his mouth better access to my entire seam. He moved me, so I rode his face. It didn't take but two minutes until I was spiraling tight and releasing a surge of arousal all over his face. With a smile and wet lips, he growled, "Now, it is time."

My body quaked in anticipation as he rolled me onto my back.

I felt the smile stretch across my face as I arched my hips off the bed in invitation, spreading my legs wider. He moved forward like a predator, pressed his chest against mine, and then licked my exposed throat. I offered him more as he lightly nipped down to the crook of my neck. I never felt so small and vulnerable in my life. If he wasn't careful, he could stop my heart from beating. I had no illusions that he could do whatever he wanted to me, but he took immense joy in my requests. Leveraging himself on his elbows, he covered me but didn't crush me. I felt safe.

I wanted more. Slipping a hand between us, he adjusted his cock between my folds, sliding up and down, mixing my arousal with his. I wrapped my arm around his neck to pull him in. Warm slickness leaked from his tip, allowing him to easily glide over my clit again and again. "More," I gritted through my teeth. Removing the hand from his cock, he used two fingers to trace down my seam. He teased the outside of my core until he dipped one thick digit inside. Slowly, he began to mimic the tempo of his thrusting hips, and then a second finger was added, which made me squirm. There was no pain, only the need for him to fill me.

The pressure of his cock gliding outside of me and now three fingers working and stroking me made my legs tremble. I could feel my body spiraling tighter. My inner walls began to flutter and grip him tighter. I felt my body flush with sweat and fire.

"Give it up, sweet one. You are going to take all of me, and this is just the beginning," he growled. He leaned down and kissed me wildly, taking care to not scratch me with his fangs. The moment I tasted myself, I gave over to the sensation of him and came with a primal moan. He stilled as I came down from my high. We never took our eyes off the other. I don't think I'd ever been so intimate with another person in my entire life. Sure, I'd had sex and shared private moments, but this felt completely different and new.

I pushed the fallen hair back behind his ear. I didn't want to miss a single expression for what was coming next. In desperate need, I cupped his face and whispered, "I'm ready."

Moving his three fingers around my satisfied pussy, he worked me and carefully spread my juices around. "You are mine," he rumbled as he flipped us over. *Sex with an Orc was like the cardio workouts I always skipped, but indeed I'd never miss this again.* I was now straddling him. My core rested on his shaft. He picked me up as if I weighed nothing at all to position me over his hard, protruding length. He wasn't going to force me on to him. I was eager and ready. I lined him at my entrance and slowly began to roll my hips in an effort to sink down onto him. The head of his cock was more prominent than anything I'd felt or seen. A few deep breaths and the gentle rubbing of his hands on my low back helped me relax and take him in further.

He bit down hard down on his lip until I saw blood well up, which turned me on. This monster, my monster, was hurting himself to keep me safe. I felt him release more liquid inside of me. I was fully

seated now and sealed to his base in one movement. We hissed in unison at the sensation. My self-control was gone as I raised up and slammed down on him. "Gods above and below, Madeline Jane," he moaned. That was fuel for me to keep going. I felt every thick ridge move inside me. I couldn't move fast or deep enough to get what I needed. I rode him up and down, never letting him completely go. In the back of my mind, I think I feared his thick cockhead. Sensing that I was holding back despite my desire, he took control.

"I will take care of you." He looked determined as he pulled me off his cock and set me on all fours. He spread my thighs widely and settled behind me on his knees. I shouldn't have been shocked when I felt tongue lapping at my core while he began to roughly twist my nipple. With a groan, he moved quickly, slamming inside of me. It felt incredible. Hard measured strokes pounded into me. I had no idea I'd like sex this rough. My body craved each thrust. Sweet heavens, the moment his piercings connected to that magical deep spot, I thought my body caught on fire. I felt him swelling and growing. I was so full; I could only imagine the obscene view of my pussy stretched wide over his thickness.

"Are you watching?" I breathlessly asked. "Do you like seeing me take every inch of you?"

That earned my ass a slap. It stung, but felt so good. He picked up his pace. "Yes, little human, this is my new favorite view. I'm going to watch your eager little cunt take me every time my cock stirs. You. Are. Mine." Each word was punctuated with a thrust. His passion and possession sent me spiraling.

"Yes." I ground back into him, letting him feel my pleasure. I felt the sting of my hair being wrapped around his hand as he continued to move, then I felt it. His release, just as it had in my mouth, filled me. I expected to feel it run out of me and down my thighs, but his cock had sealed it in apparently. He let go of my hair and pulled me up and into his lap, not letting me go and keeping our bodies connected. I rested my head against his chest and relaxed. My monster wrapped a blanket around my body and laid us on our sides, holding me close, still connected.

There was so much I wanted to say, so many questions that needed answers, so even though exhaustion hit me, I turned my head to speak. But my mate wasn't having it. "Let my seed do as it should, mate. I have no doubt we made a youngling this night. Sleep. We have many adventures ahead of us. Let your body rest. For tomorrow, I will wake you as I did the first time." He ran his fingers over my slickened, sensitive clit as a reminder of all he could do.

"That might be the best way to greet the morning." I relaxed into him. "Whether we made a baby tonight or not, I feel that we will never stop trying." The thought made me happy, even if my mind was still reeling at my new reality. "I am still in shock that my life will be forever changed for the better by getting lost in the woods."

In a soft, gentle voice that didn't match the hulking monster he looked to be, he whispered, "You are safe, loved, and will never be lost again."

THE END

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Coming May 2022:

Uniting the Stars: A Zodiac Anthology

Coming February 2023:

Dark Heart: A Monster Romance Anthology

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Austin is a former teacher, mama to a fearless daredevil toddler, and wife to the most supportive husband in the world. She resides in a small college town in the South. Her former students and family would curl up and die if they knew she wrote steamy paranormal and fantasy romance novels! Heaven forbid they learned about her Reverse Harem Romances.

Reading has always been a passion for Elizabeth. One day she decided to let the wild characters in her mind out to run and play and has enjoyed every minute of it. She loves writing about romance, magic, and mayhem. She is a firm believer in quirky characters and Happily Ever Afters!

If you would like to have some fun join me:

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BLURB

Princesses are destined to keep the monarchy going through marriage.

My people, the Kinnara, mate for life, but love is a luxury granted to those without royal responsibilities.

I know my duties come before my desires, so why do I find myself drawn to the one male I'm forbidden to love?

I do not have the luxury to love the fiercely loyal and primal gajasimha assigned as a palace guard, but when dark forces in the woods threaten all we know, how could I deny my heart to the one broken hero who risked it all?

COURTESY WARNING

This book may contain triggers for some.
Triggers may include but are not limited to violence, kidnapping and torture.

DEDICATION

To my grandfather.
To my culture.
Let hope keep us going.

SPECIES LIST

Gajasimha - The head of an elephant, main and body of a lion. These creatures mature by their twelfth year and mostly serve as the royal guard because of their propensity for fierce possessiveness, protection, loyalty, and long-standing memory.

Kinnara - The torso replicates a human, while their lower half resembles that of a colorful swan. This species hail from the lines of monarchy, their beauty, elegance, and grace representing the kingdom hidden within the forest.

Orang Bunian/Bunian People - resembles humans the most, classified as a class of elves that can be found mingling within the human plane. Their propensity for magic is seen and told in tales of old. Some never left the woods, falling into the temptations of ambition and greed, tainting their souls with darkness.

Tree People (official name unknown) - hail from tales of old, the protectors of the forest. They are not known to make their presence known but are said to bring and keep the balance of life in the woods.

Yeak - old Cambodian tale about the origins of thunder and lightning.

CHAPTER ONE

Kannit

“Tevy! Why are you wandering so far from the palace? Father is going to be angry when he finds out!”

“You’re such a spoilsport. You’ve lost your sense of adventure in your old age.”

“Tevy!” *That little...*

Growling in frustration, I turn and run into something hard, rattling my feathers. “Oh!”

“Princess, are you okay?” His trunk steadies me and I feel butterflies in my stomach from the touch. He smells of earth, warmth, and masculine musk. “What are you doing so far beyond the palace walls?”

Rith has been part of the palace guards for a while. He’s young, and ambitious in ways he should and shouldn’t be. He’s climbed the ranks faster than any palace guard in the past decade, making everyone around him take notice. Pushing unwanted thoughts to the back of my mind, I’m reminded of the issue at hand. “Rith! I’m trying to get my sister Tevy to come back. She’s being overly obnoxious and stubborn today. We’re not supposed to go that far into the woods without guards!”

His eyes sparkle and I haven’t forgotten the fact that he hasn’t let go of me yet. *I shouldn’t want this. I shouldn’t like it.* It’s inappropriate. He knows this.

Subtly turning, the slide of his trunk down my backside sends goosebumps over my skin, making my tail feathers shake. *How embarrassing.*

The sound of claws digging against stone and a deep inhale makes my face flush. I’m startled when Rith leaps beside me and runs into the woods, his royal crest and colors glinting against the sunlight. He’s so strong and quick; any woman’s eye would be hard-pressed to look away from such a sight.

But the life of a Princess is one weighed down by rules and regulations, politics and alliances. A princess is not privileged to fall in love, only marry. It’s the obligation that lingers over my head every waking hour because I’m blessed to be the first of seven.

“Where is he off to in such a hurry?”

Boupha, the second sister, stands beside me and we both watch the trees, hoping to see something move. Some of the palace guards who saw Rith begin to reposition their patrol, their long tails swishing with every step.

“Do you think Rith will find her?”

Turning to walk back towards the heart of the palace, we stop and look out to the woods again. “Rith is very good at what he does.”

She bumps my shoulders and my wings ruffle with indignation behind me. “Stop that.”

“Good at *everything* he does, huh?”

“Oh! You know what I meant. He’s a very good guard.”

“A very young one.”

Doesn’t she think I know that? Gajasimha age differently, coming into full maturity around their twelfth year. Thoughts of my own twenty-nine years of age make my face blossom with heat.

“Oh, stop acting like that, Kannit. You need not suffer alone is all I’m saying. You can talk to me, you know?”

“You don’t understand what it’s like.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But it doesn’t mean I’m blind. The Gajasimha are ferocious, and their fierce,

protective instincts make a woman want to flutter her eyelashes just to get more of a taste.”

Ugh. Does she have to bring up all his good qualities right now? *I don't need this!*

“What are you two staring at?”

“Sopheary, Tevy ran off into the woods by herself.”

“What? Why didn't she have a guard on her?”

“You know how she is.”

“Princess!”

We all turn around and find our royal council walking towards us. He's Kinnara, like we are, and again I find myself wondering why I cannot be attracted to someone like him. *I should, right?* He's the kind of man my father would match for me. Bright tail feathers, a handsome enough face, and a lean, muscular body.

“My apologies. I meant, Princess Kannit, may I have a word with you? Your father wants me to bring you to the throne room for some news.”

My insides still. *I don't like this.* Why do I feel like this?

My sisters look at me and return to staring out into the woods again, leaving me to follow Moc, our royal council, alone. *Traitors.*

With my hands clasped in front of me, my talons click on the marble of the palace grounds right behind his. The echo of the first hall tells me that all the guards have relocated to the front gardens to await Rith's return and patrol the perimeter.

“You look lovely today, Princess Kannit.”

My cheeks flush but I continue to keep my face down. He's told me this many times, always fishing for something between us. He more than anyone should know how royalty works. The decision is out of my hands where my future lies.

Beyond the opulence of the first hallway, showcasing jewels of the earth and golds found in the far-off mines deep within the ground, is the throne room. It never fails to take my breath away, how the sun's rays cast through the windows, creating spectrums of color that highlight the heavy chair sitting upon a dais. But my father doesn't await us there, no. He currently has his back towards us, arms clasped behind him, staring at a sculpture of an Apsara in motion.

“Sire, Princess Kannit.”

“Leave us, Moc. I wish to have a word with my eldest in private.”

Moc bows, but Father still hasn't turned. The colors of his feathers have begun to dull these past few years, his age becoming more evident. What once were plumes of silvers and steel blues, now melt into dull grays. If only Mother were here with us, he'd be a much happier man.

Trying to quiet the click of my talons, I purposely walk more gracefully, bringing myself to stand beside him and join in his staring. I should bow with my hands in praise, a formal greeting, but he isn't looking my way. It feels awkward and I'm unsure of how to proceed.

“Do you know what the week brings?”

“Father?” Startled by the start of his sentence, I think hard on the appropriate response. I do know, but I don't wish to talk about it.

He turns his head for a second and goes back to staring at the statue. “Do you know about the Apsara?”

He doesn't wait for me to respond.

“She is of both the skies and the waters, a goddess of grace. She is fluid, she adapts—*she*

inspires.”

I’m unsure of what he’s trying to tell me, but keep my silence as a good daughter should.

“Your mother reminded me so much of her. The epitome of a queen. Not a day goes by that I do not miss her.”

It is said around the kingdom that King Noro and his Queen are what love tales are made of. Little did they know, my mother was just another arranged marriage in a long line of monarchy brides. She was a good wife and a good mother, something I hope to be. But a life trapped with someone I may not love prevents me from embracing the obligation fully. *Does that make me a bad daughter?*

“Kannit. You are the eldest, and I have no sons.”

“I know, Pa.”

We both continue to stare at the statue, the weight of the entire conversation echoing in our silence.

CHAPTER TWO

Kannit

“What did he need to talk to you about?”

Pheak, my fourth sister, asks in earnest. Her heart is in the right place, but my soul is not. My time has come, I knew it would. At almost thirty years, our Father has let me linger in my maidenhood much longer than he should have. I'd like to think it's because of his love.

One could *also* say it's because he needed extra time to take precautions for his kingdom.

“Pheak, you know what my duty is. I'm almost too old now.”

“Kannit, has he chosen a husband for you?”

Has he? We never did continue our conversation, despite the message being clear. Does it really matter, at the end of the day? I am to marry whoever he announces, that's all there is to it.

“I don't know, but it will probably happen in a week's time.”

Tevy was escorted back home by Rith and Veasna. She was elated from so much attention. A fool, she is. In her young heart, she doesn't understand the burdens we carry as women of the kingdom. Then again, as a sixth daughter, does she really *have* any worry?

The fate of the next generation solely lies upon me, now.

“Oh, don't look so sour, sister. You'll be married off to a good man, I'm sure, then be drowned in lavishness and happiness.”

If only life was so simple. What I wouldn't give to be that young again.

“Tevy is right; you should be happy, Kannit!” Bai, the seventh sister, will probably never have to see this day.

Standing in our common room, I pace towards the window. The winds pick up, bringing in the smell of rain, and my wings bristle behind me. When I reach the ledge, my sights land on the royal guards sparring below.

I wince at the sound of their tusks slamming against one another, their trunks twisted and turned into grips around the other's head. Their manes move with the wind as their claws scratch and swipe at their opponent. It reminds me of the sound of thunder, with how hard they go at it.

It also makes me think of other things.

My face flushes, and I'm glad for the breeze to cool me down. *Why must I be like this?* It is not right for me to feel these things.

My eyes dart to the youngest and darkest in the ring, walking towards the middle. The blue and red of his coat of arms stand out, not worn enough like the others, and it catches my eye. His tusks are a beautiful shade of ivory that sweeps elegantly forward as he digs his claws into the ground before lunging, slamming his head against one of the elders.

A beast of legend, the perfect representation of our military, Rith's assertive technique brings the older guard to his knees. His roar shakes me to my core as he stands on his hind legs and brings down his front claws on his opponent's face. The elder rolls away just in time for Rith to swipe at the earth instead of flesh. His animalistic roar sends a chill down my spine, but not in a way it should.

Boupha stands beside me, her violet feathers shimmering in the light. “You best bury those thoughts deep inside, Kannit.”

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be someone else?”

“To be a female Gajasimha?”

“I’ve never seen any.”

“Me either. I don’t think they produce too many. Girls, I mean.”

“Boupha. Do you ever worry about who Father might choose for you?”

We both continue to stare at the guards sparring. “It is not my place to worry; you know that.”

I do. Knowing doesn’t stop my worry of not being able to love the man chosen for me. Kinnara mate for life. *What if...what if the man Pa chooses for me does not love me?* What if I never learn to love him?

“You can’t, you know?” She tilts her head subtly towards the guards below. “All you will have are your dreams. Don’t lose sight of that.”

My breath hitches, but I hide it. *Is that my dream?* I don’t know what I want. I was never allowed to want, only to abide by duty and obligation.

“What are you two looking at?”

Bai flutters her red and orange wings, too small yet to lift her weight. When her talons land on the marble, she almost trips, making the two of us laugh.

“Nothing for you to worry about. Come. Let’s see what the chef has prepared for dinner, hmm?”

“Oooh! That sounds amazing! I am hungry.”

We all laugh at Bai. *When isn’t she hungry?*

“My daughters, I have an announcement to make.”

This is it. My fate will be sealed upon Father’s lips. We all put our eating utensils down and give him our undivided attention. He smiles, and the wrinkles on his face remind me that even as a king, he mated much later in his life.

“Kannit. Thirty years have come by much faster than I’d like. As your father, it is my job to make sure I secure my daughter a hand and give her a comfortable future without worries. As your king, it is my job to make sure the pairing is a wise one.”

My hands are rubbing down my feathers, trying to stave off my nerves. Chantrea’s hand stops mine under the table, but her eyes never leave our father’s.

“Make no mistake, my daughter. Many offers have come through my door during the years.”

What? Why did he never tell me of this?

“I can see the question in your eyes. It is because they were not good enough for you. You don’t need to know about something that has no impact on your life. But this offer has come a few times now, and I believe I have finally made my decision.”

The dining hall is so quiet, the only sound is our collective bated breaths.

“I wish for you to remain with me out of my own selfishness. Because of this, I have accepted Moc’s proposal, and will arrange your marriage ceremony a week from this day.”

He stands, gives me a sad smile, turns, and walks away. *What does this mean? Is he not happy with his decision?*

When Father exits the room, the girls and I give it a few moments before our murmurs become louder.

“Well, *that* wasn’t a surprise.”

Turning to Chantrea, I give her a quizzical look. She’s barely around me enough to notice anything. *Why would she think that?*

She picks up her jeweled chalice and takes a sip. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. I may not always be following your shadow, but anyone can see how our royal council looks at you when you’re in the same room.”

Turning away from her, I bring a piece of meat into my mouth and chew silently.

“He’s not a bad man, you know. He’s been pining after you since you came of age.”

Swallowing, I almost choke. “What?”

“Oh come on, sis. That man has it bad for you!”

“Boupha, not you too.”

All my sisters begin to tease me, telling me of all their witnessing of Moc and his subtle courting I was too blind to notice. It lightens the mood, the feeling of dread easing a little off my soul.

When the servants come in to collect our trays, we stand and make our way out to the palace gardens for a walk. Night has fallen, and the light of the moon casts a subtle glow, enough for us to see our way.

Two palace guards stand watch at the exit. They slam their speared weapons on the marble twice, notifying any of the nearby patrol guards of our movement.

The rumble of footsteps and the scrape of claws along marble make me lift my head to see four guards coming our way.

When they are close enough, I see that it is Veasna, Dara, Arun and Rith.

“Fair maidens should never venture alone. Let us escort you and keep you safe while you enjoy your walk.”

Pheak stifles a laugh at Veasna. His attempts at flirting are atrocious but he enjoys the attention anyway. Veasna’s trunk trumpets sadly and taps her on the shoulder, making her giggle.

The men begin to surround us as we all walk together in a group. Rith leaves the others to walk right up to my side in companionable silence.

“Do the stars shine on both the just and unjust in the world?”

Startled, I look at him, my wings tightening towards my body in case we accidentally get too close.

“I suppose.”

“And so, the sun shines on the happy *and* the sad.”

Why is he saying this to me?

“What bothers you, my princess?”

“Why do you think something is bothering me?”

His eyes glint as he tilts his head to look at me from the side. A few moments of silence pass, and Rith speaks again.

“It’s the way your feathers gleam. When you are happy, they plume and shine, glinting against the light to remind us all of what we can only hope to achieve. When you are sad, your blues overtake the jewel tones of your magentas, reminding me of rain.”

My breath quickens. Without even touching me, the moment feels much more intimate than it should. Quickly looking around me, I see that the rest of my sisters have lagged behind, leaving Rith and I a few feet ahead.

The trees are thicker around the south side of the palace, covering any of the light the moon is able to cast upon us. Rith changes his position and places himself between the trees and my body as if it wasn’t even a conscious thought, but an automatic reaction. I shouldn’t be so distracted by the way his muscles ripple under the fur of his shoulders, or the way his mane moves in the subtle breeze.

The swoop of his tusks are lethal when I watch him spar, but this close, I'm lost in their elegance.

My skin goosebumps at the thought of how he might feel against me, and suddenly, his voice booms.

"We make our way back to the palace. That is enough for the night. Dara, Veasna, Arun!"

They respond with a quiet trumpet in agreement, following Rith's orders as we turn and double back the way we came.

"Seems my future has been set out before me." Why my mind decided to tell him that, I will never understand.

"Futures are never set in stone."

I quietly laugh as I rub my arms to try and warm myself up. Rith comes close enough to me to give me his body heat without actually touching me.

"The future of a princess is."

"Only if you allow them to."

"What choice do I have?"

"Life is a choice, princess."

His statement hits me in the chest. I turn my head to look at him only to see him staring right back at me with much more wisdom than I initially thought. What has happened in his life prior to becoming a King's guard, I wonder.

We make it back to the palace grounds and one by one, my sisters walk towards their rooms. The other males return to their post, leaving Rith and I the last ones to enter.

"As always, your presence has been a pleasure."

"We did nothing but walk, Rith."

"Some die knowing they'll never be delighted by your presence."

Turning, my heart saddens at that. "Maybe that is something I need to change, once things..."

"The only constant in life is change. You don't need to force anything that would happen all on its own."

He speaks in riddles, and I suddenly wonder what he's really trying to tell me.

"Rith—"

"Kannit! Come inside! It's only getting colder out there." The sound of Sopheary's voice breaks whatever this moment is, and I quickly bow with my hands together before turning to leave without finishing my thought.

CHAPTER THREE

Rith

“Come at me again!”

My head slams into Pich's and we push so hard our claws dig into the earth for leverage. He's a bit taller than I am, but also older. It is said we gain strength the more we age, but I like to think I'm in my prime and can take on any of the guards here.

Twisting my head, I let my opponent think I'm about to use my tusks, when I swipe at his neck and throw him down onto the ground. The roars and trumpets are loud enough to ring my ears as Pich's hind legs get beneath my belly, throwing me off, making me land with a crash. The pain invigorates me and only makes me laugh as I throw my head to the side, spearing him with my tusk. I can see his right paw extending his nails in preparation and I open my jaws and grab his tusk, shaking his head like a feral beast. He screams, and my body ducks low enough to lift him under his chest and toss him to the side.

“Enough! Next spar!” Our Captain yells out for the next sparring duo to the center.

“Rith, you're going to break my ivories one of these days with a move like that.”

“Like that, did you?”

“You tussle like you were brought up in the wilds of the forest.”

“Maybe I was.”

Pich gets back on his feet, shaking his mane and tail to rid himself of the dirt.

“Don't lie to me, boy. I knew your parents and grandparents.”

“That says nothing of me.”

“It says everything about you. Your father was just as hard-headed and stubborn as you are. You're just a little cockier than he ever was.”

I laugh and shake my own mane, running my claws against the grass.

“So you say, old man. It's about time you found yourself a female and leave the guard duties to the males my own age.”

“Bah! You all can learn a thing or two from those who came before you. Have you even seen a battle?”

“Is there one coming?”

“Not that I've heard. But there *is* something coming that you need to prepare for.”

We both walk towards the armory, relieving the sentries there. “And what is that?”

“The official wedding ceremony between Princess Kannit and the Royal Council.”

What?

“Don't look so shocked, boy. You know the eldest is coming up on her thirtieth birthday. She's well past the point of a mating ceremony for a Kinnara.”

Thoughts of another male touching Kannit makes the hairs on my back stand. I don't understand why I've been drawn to her. She, of all people, would never give a Gajasimha a second look. Our kind are too far apart, too different. *How would one even mate with a—?*

Shaking my head, I lift my lip in a curl. It is not fitting for a guard to think such thoughts of the princess.

Standing sentry beside Pich, a multitude of different emotions course through me. Some I do not understand, some that make me want to tear into something.

“Where’s Tevy? Has anyone seen her?”

It’s her frantic voice in the distance that makes my legs move before I even see her. Princess Kannit’s feathers are ruffled and frazzled as she runs around, asking each guard her question. Every head shake she gets, her wings bristle more behind her.

When I see her run towards the woods, calling for her sister, my legs carry me right behind.

“Pich! I’m going after her.”

“Dara! Arun! Find Princess Tevy!” Pich’s voice booms and the other guards take notice.

“On it!”

The sound of the other males behind me only urge my footfalls faster. *How does Princess Kannit run so quickly?* The sight of her feathers disappearing into the forest makes my heart beat out of my chest. *She knows she shouldn’t leave the palace grounds without a guard!*

My feet swiftly follow her trail, only to lose it a few miles into the woods. Darkness begins to envelop, the trees having been used as a barrier to hide the palace for many centuries.

“Tevy!”

Her voice echoes in the distance without giving away her direction. Taking in a deep breath, I have to rely on my sense of smell as I zig zag around the trees. I can hear my brother in arms moving behind me as I jump over the boulders and fallen logs, deeper into the forest. Princess Kannit is in danger of losing her way, the woods known to have a life of its own, playing tricks on the unsuspecting. There is a reason why it’s shielded us from trouble for so long.

“Princess Kannit!”

Nothing.

My heart races as my claws leap over debris, my trunk following her light scent of jasmine flowers. When her smell diminishes, anger consumes me. *I will not lose her like this!*

A small clearing surrounding still waters in the woods has me skidding to a stop. Turning around, I listen. Nothing but the sound of insects and leaves rustling.

Suddenly, the silence grows loud, and my instincts are screaming at me.

Left!

My paws move before my body can tell them to. *Something is calling me.* The royal garb is becoming obnoxious with the way it hits my flesh the faster I run.

There!

It’s soft, but it’s her lilt.

Faster!

Whispers enter my ears and I force myself to stay on task, to keep to the mission. *I’m almost there!*

“Princess Kannit!”

Suddenly the sound of her voice comes from behind me. Skidding, I leap against a large tree trunk, digging my claws into the bark to stop my momentum.

How did she get behind me so fast? Turning, I see nothing. An eerie emotion saturates the air, and the woods no longer look familiar. It feels as if the trees have moved and the earth has turned. *How is this possible?*

A sound from the right of me takes me by surprise and I roar, my claws outstretched and swiping before I see the opponent.

“Rith! You almost took my nose!”

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you on edge?”

Dara and Veasna are both staring at me with caution. Shaking my mane, I try to relax the unease I still feel. *How did they find me? Have I turned myself around?*

“Rith, we’ve been following your trail to tell you Arun found Princess Tevy and brought her back home.”

“Yeah, we almost lost you at the lake, you move so fast.”

“Where’s Princess Kannit?”

“What do you mean? I thought it was just Princess Tevy that went into the woods.”

“Princess Kannit is still in here!”

The males curse in unison. “We’ll send for the other guards to get more into the woods. Don’t go too far. We’ll need you to help us—”

An explosion of anger runs through me. They want me to wait? *Wait? For what?* For Princess Kannit to become even more lost in woods that would devour her whole? I leave my comrades before they can finish their thought. They don’t understand the direness of the situation. *She needs me!*

The sound of roars and trumpets can be heard in the distance, but I’m already back to the lake. The sound of insects brings deja-vu, and something whispers in my ear again.

Right!

I follow their lead and let my paws carry me. It feels as if a root moves right as my front paws land, because it trips me. Rolling, I land back on my feet and make sure to increase the awareness of my surroundings. Something isn’t right.

The sound of whimpers make my ears fold back. Running towards the next cluster of trees beyond the next small clearing, my tusk breaks away some of the dead branches near my face. The glint of deep blues and teals contrast against the earthy tones of the woods around her.

“Princess!”

Her wings bristle and her colors subtly change until she turns her tear-streaked face towards me.

“Rith!” She runs and almost trips, her wings fluttering to soften her descent.

When I’m close enough, my trunk catches her and brings her close.

“I got you.”

“Rith, I was so scared!” Her arms are around my neck and it fills my heart. “I was right behind Tevy, and then it was like she disappeared. I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. I didn’t realize how deep into the woods I went.”

“It’s okay.”

A twig snaps and we both freeze. Pushing her behind me, the sound of eerie laughter floats around us. Shadows move in and out of our periphery and my hair stands on end. “Stay behind me.”

“What is this?”

“This is what it is.”

“Are your eyes seeing what I’m seeing?”

“The crest of the King.”

The voices bounce back and forth, from the left then the right, and again from behind. Where are they? The forest is becoming darker, and it’s not from the setting of the sun.

“So deep he’s lost himself.”

“And brought us a feast.”

“That he did. A feast in finery.”

Roaring in agitation, I claw the ground and bare my teeth. “Show yourself!”

“He demands.”

“As if he is king.”

“In a land that takes no king.”

“He is king of nothing.”

“But he has something we want.”

They speak in circles and talk in riddles, memories of childhood tales niggle the back of my mind. How far have we lost ourselves in the woods? How did we end up in Orang Bunian territory? The benevolent whistling elves of the woods—but these aren’t the same ones told in tales around classrooms, no. They look like they’ve been swallowed in evil and are living corpses with pretty faces.

The first one emerges and exposes a head full of black, straggly hair, its eyes dark as the deep depths of the woods themselves. Its face is almost slack, like a puppet wearing the skin of a living being.

“You recognize the Bunian people. I see it in your eyes. You are not surprised, and it makes me curious.”

“We just need to head back to where we came from. We will leave your grounds.” Maybe I can negotiate a peaceful exit. No blood has to be shed.

Princess Kannit screams and I swiftly turn to find one of the Bunian with one of her feathers in its hand. Its head tilts side to side, as it continues to walk forward, bending its legs in awkward angles.

Throwing my head to the side, my tail wraps around the Princess’s midsection to keep track of her as my tusk cuts through the air, missing the Bunian as it flips backwards and lands on all four limbs. When its head turns in the wrong angle to look back at me, my mane bristles. *Unnatural*.

Tsk-ing sounds reminiscent of a bird call echo around us as my head snaps back to the first Bunian. “You speak in false hopes. Tricking those with ears in your innocence and then turn to try and impale poor Mentar.”

“Aulia. You saw what I saw. I was only wanting a taste, to see if she is as good as her colors portray.”

The emergence of more Bunian from behind the trees has my mind going through all the possible escape routes with Princess Kannit in tow. She cannot fly, the branches and the leaves too dense here. She’s trapped. I’m our only hope, and the pressure of that duty is weighing heavily on me the more the Bunian surround and circle us like prey.

One lunges at me from the right and my claws swipe at him, cutting through his flesh, but it quickly heals back. *What kind of sorcery is this?*

“Banyo! Keep it together.”

“That’s what I was doing, you fool.” He rubs at his flesh that doesn’t look like it’s part of who is wearing the skin.

“Kitty cat found himself a stray.”

“Just like those stupid horned horses. You remember them, Lestari?”

“Oh yes. I still have the horns as a souvenir.”

“Let us leave in peace!”

Princess Kannit screams when a net made of vines is thrown on her, distracting me. I shouldn’t have turned, because the moment I do, the Bunian claw at me with their long, black fingers, digging into my flesh and spreading the feeling of something all over me—an evil permeating my skin and

drowning me in their darkness until everything around me is silenced.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rith

Roaring, my skin stretches and breaks open the wounds on my back again. My head slams against a barrier I cannot see. Each time my flesh touches it, something crawls along the surface of my skin like the prick of a thousand sword edges just superficial enough to burn.

“Ahhh!” Her screams make me rage, my brain ignoring the pain as I continuously run towards the sound of her voice.

“Birdie, birdie, can’t fly away.”

“Found herself in a cage.”

“It’ll be over soon, and you’ll be free again.”

“As long as she ends where it begins.”

The smell of singed hair burns my nostrils and I trumpet to the skies. The birds fly away, creating a massive sound of wings fluttering—a reminder of what I’m supposed to protect. *I’ve failed her.*

My claws scratch the ground, digging for an exit as their mumbles and rhymes continue to haunt our ears.

“He wishes to see her.”

“We all do. What does she look like underneath it all?”

“All of everything, when it’s removed.”

“Do birds fly without their feathers?”

“Soon to find out, Rimba. We’ve caught the prettiest bird.”

“I’m going to kill you all!” I shouldn’t have these thoughts—not as a palace guard. We keep the peace, keep the palace safe and calm with our quiet strength—but they are driving me to the brink of madness, the longer they keep me away from her.

The one that looks like the leader, Aulia, steps forward, her face emotionless as her head tilts left and right.

“You are a peculiar Gajasimha; not that many roam this far.”

Another Bunian walks on all fours, its limbs bent in all the wrong ways as it lifts his head up, neck bent at an awkward angle. “His ivories are much bigger than the horses.”

The eyes that gleam beneath the skin make me roar, and suddenly the head slam I’ve begun lands me right in the muddy ground. The barrier has disappeared, and Bunian after Bunian jumps on me, pulling every which way. My rage throws a few of them off, piercing their hides, but there’s too many of them against one of me, and I suddenly find myself held down at the back of the neck. One of the Bunian bites my front claw, making me cry in pain and anger.

A distraction.

My trunk wasn’t fast enough to stop the blade that cuts through the air, wielded by a Bunian that leaps off the shoulder of another. His weapon glints against the flame in the middle of the camp as it swings down, slicing through one of my tusks, rocking me to the marrow.

“Arrrggghhh!”

“Rith! Nooo!”

Her cries bring me back to the present despite the pain against the root of my right tusk, throbbing from how hard the Bunian had to bring down the blade. Roaring, my hind claws throw off the two beneath me, giving me an opening to throw my head to the right and impale the one holding my head

down.

Another slice and the side of my head burns, the smell of cauterized flesh stinging my nostrils.

“Ahhhh!” The princess screams again and my eyes see red, a haze of rage overtaking my senses, dulling the pain around me. Leaping forward, my head slams against the leader, sending her flying against a nearby tree trunk with a crash. The sound of branches breaking around me drowns into a buzz behind the ear that’s missing. It’s the glint of her darkened feathers that catch my eye, focusing me on what needs to be done.

My paws lead me, swiping at anything that comes towards me until I see her tied, her hands and wings behind her. Her tear-stained face makes my chest feel tight and my teeth grit as I use my remaining tusk to rip through the flesh of the Bunian on top of her. His abdomen rips open, but it’s not guts that spill out, but another creature as black as death, crawling on all fours and jumping into the next vessel that’s fallen.

Shadows surround us, disappearing in and out from the left and right. The light cast from the flame in the center of the camp begins to flicker out, creating the illusion of darkness that dances and taunts. Nothing good happens in the dark of this forest where the unnatural roam and reign.

A sharp and unholy scream erupts, piercing my ear drums. The princess covers her ears with her hands, but it’s no use. The crimson streaks can still be seen seeping between her delicate fingers.

On my last leap, my trunk grabs her and throws her beyond a fallen log, giving us enough coverage for my teeth and claws to snap her ropes made of vines.

“Get on!”

Her wings falter but flutter just far enough to grab onto my mane, and I run us both away from the Bunian camp, leaving the shrill screams of death and destruction behind us like a waking nightmare.

The sound of twigs snapping and leaves rustling haunt us every few steps, reminding us of their ability to blend into the darkness.

Schhwing! Thunk!

It cuts across the flesh of my shoulder, but not deep enough to make me stop. More spears come at us, some of them tied with familiar feathers that further enrage me at the position we’re in. *It’s my fault they did that to her! I need to save us!*

My muscles burn and my throat becomes sore with every roar as their arrows and spears chase us deeper into the unknown. I didn’t pay attention to our direction, only wanting to get us as far away from their lands as I can. The realization fuels my guilt more than being caught in this mess to begin with.

“Rith! I’m slipping!”

“Princess! Hold on!”

Her grip on my mane grounds me until I can physically feel one of her hands loosen. *No! Not now! Not when we’re almost away!*

The spears have stopped, but my heart continues to race, my gut telling me that it isn’t over yet—that the princess isn’t safe yet.

The groan of something deep and rumbling catches me by surprise, making my claws skid against loose earth, the smell of wet marsh becoming stronger.

“Rith!”

The sound of her wings fluttering snaps my head in her direction. Leaping against the tree I’m about to impact, my claws dig into the bark as I push my momentum the opposite way, grabbing the

princess against my chest and rolling us against the ground with my head tucked over hers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kannit

Groaning from the pain of the fall, my head rings with everything that's happened. I'm against something rock solid and soft at the same time, my hands trying to figure out what's going on around me.

Fur. The heat of a chest that rises and falls makes my eyes snap open in fear.

Rith surrounds me, his head tilted to the side limply. My breath hitches from the sight before me. They've mutilated his ear and one of his tusks is gone. My eyes burn with tears as I hold him closer, mentally screaming my apologies for everything we've both gone through. *I should have never run after her. I should have never let myself become lost!*

If it wasn't for me ... Rith wouldn't be like this. He wouldn't have been tortured, torn, and burned. My own feathers have been pulled, prodded, and plucked, but it's nothing compared to this.

"Please forgive me."

He doesn't move but continues to slowly breathe, letting me know he still lives. *What do I do now?* I don't know where we are. Gathering what courage I have, I slowly peek over Rith's shoulder, gently pushing his heavy arm off me.

Swish! Thunk!

A whimper escapes my lips as my eyes stare at the spear that lands right where I was looking. Quickly ducking back into Rith's limp arms, I shake with fear. *What do we do?*

There's a chittering and tsking noise that echoes around us, sending a chill down to my tailfeathers.

"Rith." *Silence.* Pushing him still doesn't wake him, and I'm getting more scared by the minute. "Rith!"

Finally he moans, and my heart soars, but only for a second.

"Birdie flew away from her cage."

"We weren't done playing."

"Rude of her when we were giving her company."

A head pops up over Rith's shoulder and the skin on the face looks like it's sliding off the skull, making me scream.

"Kitty is sleeping, don't you know."

"Maybe it's time to play with him, Bulan."

"Oh, that sounds like loads of fun."

"No, no! Leave him alone!" *You've done enough!*

"What would you give us, then?"

"Have something to trade?"

"A life for a life?"

"A limb for a limb?"

Is this really happening? What do I do? What are they talking about?

"He has more than her, that's not quite fair."

"How do we even the score?"

"Simple as most things in this life, Mentar."

Their eerie, airy laughs turn into cackles before I realize what's happening. A few of them jump onto Rith's body and slam their long nails in his side, making him trumpet in pain.

“There! Do you see it?”

“Banyo, you play!”

I scream when I finally realize what’s about to happen. “Nooo!” My talons swing up and scratch at the one on top of Rith’s side, dislodging his claws. *I can’t let them!*

One of the Bunian leaps from behind and takes me by surprise, landing on top of me the moment I hear a blood-curdling scream and roar.

My hand scratches and claws at the creature trapping me, my talons trying to dislodge him in my fear and adrenaline. When he screams in agony, my head snaps to the side to witness one Bunian in front of Rith, raising his severed trunk in triumph, and the other raising his last ear.

“No!” My voice screams so loud it feels like my throat is being ripped to shreds when suddenly the ground rumbles, causing the Bunian around us to topple and chitter.

Roots begin to break the earth and lift from the ground, bringing with them the fresh smell of dirt. Vines swing down and grab the Bunian by the neck, tossing them to the side.

“The games we play, we win and live for the day,” the ugliest Bunian says.

They begin to chant and some of them move their arms in the air in strange patterns, a darkness leaking out through their fingertips. The air feels like rot—thick, disturbing—and my skin itches with something vile as I watch in horror as something *else* emerges from the woods.

Enormous shadows slowly move towards us. The low creak and cracks make my heart stop as I witness something that *should not be*. The trees move in such a way that makes me shake my head and rub my eyes in disbelief. Arms and legs grow as tree people begin to detach from deeply rooted trunks and vines. Their eyes are empty sockets larger than a person’s head. My hand slaps over my mouth as I watch their mouths gape open and devour some of the Bunian still lost in their magic casting.

Their screeches of death make me scream and crawl into Rith’s chest, holding on to the rhythm of his breathing as comfort. *Please stay with me Rith! I’m so sorry!* With my eyes shut tight, I bury my face into his fur, soaking in the warmth of the false protection I feel.

Cracks and snarls, screeches and screams. The harrowing sound of howling weaves through the air around us, and suddenly, the woods become quiet.

This is all a waking nightmare, surely my eyes deceive me. I’m going to wake up back home in the palace, telling my sisters of the strange tales my mind unfolded in my subconsciousness. But Rith’s body cooling drags me back to reality, and my tears steadily flow down my cheeks. *No. It can’t be. No!*

Are we to die here this day? Have I brought enough to this life to leave without regrets? My biggest regret weighs my heart down as my arms go around the male who risked his life to save me.

A low groan near my ears makes me scream as something clasps onto my waist and pulls me from the only protection I’ve known since my life descended into chaos.

CHAPTER SIX

Kannit

“No! Rith! Leave me with him!”

The branches that poke into my skin turn me, and I find myself face to face with something I’ve only heard in tales from my childhood.

The protectors of the forest come to life.

My body shakes with fear and my tears never stop falling as I think of Rith on the ground without me. “Please!” What I’m begging for, I do not know. The helplessness and hopelessness of my situation drowns me in sorrow as my heart tries to reach out to Rith, to tell him to keep fighting for life.

“Moc doich Apsara. Neang yom doich preah.”

I can’t understand anything it’s saying, but my ears sharpen on the word *Apsara*. *Mother, what do I do?* Power of a monarchy has no place in the wilds of the woods. Survival must come by different means, and I am not prepared—life as a princess never prepared me for this.

The tree person lowers me, and I’m baffled. When his branch arms reach for Rith, I scream.

“No!” Running to cover him with my body, I sob at the state of my guard—of Rith left worse than when we initially escaped. *There is no hope here. A life sacrificed, for what?* A princess of nothing—a person who could not even save him.

When the branches come closer, I embrace Rith’s furs tighter. I am unworthy to be beside him. I’ve done nothing to aid in our journey and escape. In this moment, my own existence runs like flashes of memories before my eyes. *What have I done with my life to be worthy of my station? To be worthy of such devotion?*

The branch touches him and I slap it away. “No!” The least I can do is save his dignity as he takes his last breaths on this earth.

Vines snake around me and pull me away, making me sob and claw at the ground with my talons to return back to Rith’s side. I cannot let him leave like this! He needs me to be with him! *It’s all I have left to give!*

“Com carac clang peak. Ouy kay chuy.”

“No!”

I fight, and claw, my wing-fluttering of no use, the strain of my muscles aching the harder I beat them. The Bunian have clipped my wings grossly; it’s affecting my flight. More tears spring forth at all that we’ve been through together. *Why? What did we ever do to deserve this life?*

The air shimmers with something and it prickles my skin, making my feathers stand on end. Unlike the Bunian, it feels light—a sense of weight lifted as my eyes widen at the sight before me. The vines continuously pull me back, but it doesn’t block me from witnessing the magic of the forest surrounding Rith’s limp body. The blood seeping under his head soaks into the ground like an offering, and a bright light shines to the point of blinding me, forcing me to cover my eyes for those few moments.

When the light vanishes, my heart skips a beat in anticipation. *What has it done to him?* Surely magic as light as that cannot wreak evil?

The vines drop me, landing me on one of my wings, and I wince. Pushing the pain back, I crawl towards Rith to see him still breathing, his face no longer a mangled, bloody mess. His trunk and tusk never returned, but the wound has been sealed, leaving freshly-healed skin in its wake.

“No rouh, moc doich yeak. No rouh.”

Yeak.

Tales of old.

A giant beast that fought with the goddess with relentless drive, never giving up. But how does that relate to us? Rith and I never fought. My hands caress his face, soaking in the warmth of his life. My fingers trail along the jagged scars left behind, a stark contrast of color to his usual dark complexion. Perhaps the tree person was only referring to the state in which Rith is left in.

His soul is still just as beautiful to me as the day he caught my eye, entering our palace as a simple soldier. Lowering my forehead to his, I let myself physically express how I feel for the first time in the open. What worth is the life of a princess, locked away from the realities of life? The regret of not having the skill—of not knowing enough to be able to save him—cuts into me deeply.

In this moment, the eternity that has passed from when I found myself lost in the woods takes its toll. My eyes flutter with tiredness and a small sense of relief that Rith will not die within these woods from loss of blood or infection. Letting my body lean against his chest, I move his arms around me and press my cheek against his body.

From an untouched princess to one that clings for her very life, oh how so much has changed. I'm unsure if the Bunian are still alive or if they will return, but the light magic left in the air continues to surround us with a sense of comfort and reprieve.

The weight of Rith's life and future presses on my shoulders heavily as I try to allow myself to sleep. If the power of life and death rests in my hands, I would never make a good queen. I can't even handle *this. I've failed you, Rith, and it tears my soul apart knowing that.*

My mind finally succumbs to the darkness, and the last thoughts drifting in and out are of what the future holds for Rith once we return to the palace.

Something moves beside me and it wakes me, my heart pounding. My arms stretch out, only to find Rith's body covering mine from above.

"Rith?"

He stands in silence and crawls backwards until his face is right behind my neck. The warmth of his breath gives me goosebumps, and I don't understand why my mind doesn't tell me to run like a sane person would. Instead, my eyes close, and I take in all the senses around me except for sight.

Let yourself feel—let yourself free for once. Free from expectation, free from obligation. Like this moment, such freedom scares me. It's the unknown.

"Princess Kannit." His voice is different, deeper, much more gravelly, like the Bunian severed his throat during our last encounter.

My tears spring forth as I turn myself to look at the male who saved me—who saved us from death. There's a scar that runs from the corner of each eye down his face; it looks like boiling water has been thrown on him, with how the skin has healed and puckered. The cavernous hole of his nostrils rests just above the line of his eyes, since there's no longer a trunk to cover it. The right tusk protrudes from his skull, while the left has been splintered and broken.

"Rith." Can there be beauty in tragedy? The beauty of life among the horrors and hopelessness of death.

His honeyed eyes darken with something I'm not familiar with, right before he buries his face against the ground to the right of me.

“Don’t look at me like that, Princess.”

My heart is torn asunder. It physically hurts for him. “What are you talking about?”

“I need to bring you back to the palace. Can you fly?”

Flashbacks of what the Bunian did to my wings make me wince like it’s happening all over again. The phantom sensation of their claws raking at me, pulling at my feathers, and the way the one on all fours pinned me down and tried to—

Rith swings his head and his tusk almost catches on my face, making me yelp, effectively taking me out of the nightmare playing before my eyes. He growls, and my hackles rise. *What is going on? Why is he making that noise?*

He stands and begins to pace back and forth like a caged beast—the way he did when we were captured by the Bunian. Though our lives are ours again, the incident has left us with both external and internal scars as unwanted gifts.

“I’ve failed you.”

Has a statement ever felt any sharper than this one? How can he feel this way? “What?”

“You cannot fly. I let that happen. I should have killed them all when I had the chance.”

When he had the chance? When was that? We were both trying to survive! “Rith, there’s nothing you—”

He stops and lunges at me with a ferocity in his eyes that burns into mine like a branding. “There’s so much I could have done! This should have never happened to you!” His next growl breaks, and my chest constricts painfully. “How do I return to the palace like this? How can I be allowed to remain by your side to keep you safe from this ever happening again?”

His face is right against mine, the eyes on the side of his skull brimming with sorrow. My hands come up, and he jerks his face away.

“No. Do not pity me. This is my duty and honor as a guard to the Princess. I need to bring you home.”

What does one say to that? Am I pitying him? Our lives are now intertwined much deeper than who we used to be, before this all happened.

“Can you walk?”

He nuzzles me with his face and helps to lift me with his tusk. With an arm looped over his ivory, I bring myself to standing and try to relieve my legs of the pins and needles that reach my talons.

“I think so.”

“Then we move until we find the direction of the sun.”

Is it wrong of me to miss the way his trunk used to wrap around my waist? *What is wrong with you, Kannit? How can you think that?*

The scent of freshly unearthed soil overtakes my sense of smell as we walk along an unknown path. The trees slowly begin to thin, and the sun’s rays filter through the leaves and branches.

“We’re headed north.”

“Is that the right way?”

“We’ll find out. We were turned around by the Bunian, but we’ll find our way.”

We walk in heavy silence, the questions running through both our minds weighing us down but refusing to leave our lips to bring it to life.

When my thighs begin to burn, I wince as one of my toes gets caught under a root.

“We stop for now.”

His tail wraps around me and my stomach somersaults. When it leaves, I feel bereft. *What is wrong with me?*

Rith paws at some of the dead leaves around us and creates a nest. Tears spring to my eyes. *Am I that pathetic?* Wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, I bend down to help him, only to have him grunt.

Turning my head to look at him, something crosses his features, and he frowns. “What’s wrong?”

“You shouldn’t have to be on your knees to do this. If I still had my trunk—”

His claws smash into the pile, sending leaves every which way, startling me. My eyes widen, and I stand up and take a step back.

He laughs without humor and it scares me. “That’s it, isn’t it? This is how it’s going to be? You’re only giving me a small taste of what I have to look forward to when we get back to the palace.”

Instant regret courses through me at my actions. “No; don’t say that.”

“Say what? What you’ve been thinking the entire time we’ve been walking?”

I shake my head in denial, at a loss for words.

He roars and claws at the ground before slamming both paws and his head down. He shakes his mane when he lifts his head back and growls at the branches above us. There’s a storm inside of him, and it threatens to swallow us both.

“Is this what you had in store for me? Is this the destiny I was always supposed to have?” The next roar breaks my heart as he begins to pace and slap some of the leaves back towards the pile we’ve started.

“Rith...”

“Princess. Don’t you say it. There is no future left for me. *Not like this*. Not when I look like a *yeak*! I will be shunned and exiled at best!” He growls and walks towards me, but I stand my ground with what little courage I have. After all, wasn’t it me who ruined his life? “The king would never let me remain your guard, Princess Kannit. And that is the biggest regret that eats me from the inside.”

“Why?” I shouldn’t prod. I shouldn’t poke a beast that looks like he’s about to turn feral. But something inside of me just yearns to know—*needs* to know. It’s a pull that makes my skin feel too tight, the longer he makes me wait for an answer.

“Because I’m bound by your side.” He turns his head and continues to collect leaves into a pile much bigger than one would need.

“No.”

He stops, swings his head and stares at me. “There is no, *no*. I was to remain at your side.”

“You’re lying.”

He snorts and ignores me.

“Anyone could have been by my side. Pich, Veasna, Dara—”

He growls, and the next swing of his head almost impales me with his tusk if it wasn’t for me fluttering back a step.

“No one is to be by your side but *me*.”

He’s breathing harder, the tension in the air getting thicker. My skin prickles, but something inside of me tells me to call his bluff.

“I relieve you of your duty to me, then.”

He laughs, and it sends a chill down my spine. Where is the easygoing guard that I’ve come to look forward to getting a glimpse of each day? *Did I really think that?*

He steps towards me and I try to keep my position. When his eyes grow darker as he takes the next step, my breath hitches and I take a step back. The top of his mane bristles and his body begins to slink lower as he continues to come towards me. My heart picks up. There's something happening right now. My fight or flight kicks in, and as ironic as it is, I choose flight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kannit

Turning, I let my legs take me in a direction, any direction. A roar is behind me, the sound of his large paws hitting the earth making me excited and scared all at once.

I don't make it far when Rith pounces on me, caging me between his warm body and the cool earth. I'm panting, what I'm feeling is bringing all my senses to high alert. I've never felt like this before—this *alive* while fearing for death.

My hair has come out of its braid long since we've escaped from the Bunian. I don't notice it until I feel something I didn't expect.

"Don't run from me." His face rubs against my back and it sends a thrill down my spine—one that isn't fully fear. "I can't help what my instincts make me do." He rubs his face again, and suddenly a tongue licks the crook of my neck, making my breath stutter and my legs scissor. "You smell so good. Like the fresh rain after a long day of sparring."

Why does that make me feel the way I do? My wings flutter, rubbing against his abdomen, and he sighs against me.

"You've been mine from the moment I set my eyes on you."

"Wh-what?"

His tongue snakes out again and I twist my head away. He growls and my body stills. When his tongue reaches me again, he licks me in such an intimate way that it makes my body hot. *What is happening right now? And why am I not running away?*

But it's Rith.

A Rith you don't recognize.

Is it the spontaneous change in his demeanor that keeps me prisoner right now? *What is wrong with you? This isn't how a princess conducts herself!*

The weight of obligation and expectations makes me crawl forward, only to have Rith's paws trap both of my arms in front of me with my behind in the air.

"You reject me, even as a guard, before I'm able to bring you back safely. I'm not surprised. They all will."

Guilt hits me.

"No. I-I just—"

His voice lowers in octaves, his face rubbing against my shoulder blades. "Are you afraid of me?"

Am I? The goosebumps on my skin would have me think yes. The logic of my mind tells me it's from something else entirely—something I don't fully understand just yet.

"You're mine, Princess Kannit. I cannot see you with another guard, don't you understand? It burns me to know you even think of another in my rightful place."

Something inside of me pricks at my gut. A need to reassure him—to make him understand that there could never be another by my side, because it's always been him.

Instincts take over, confusing me, making my body relax against the ground. His body follows the curvature of my spine like a ballet dance, pressing me with a welcomed weight.

Hasn't it always been me seeking him out? Haven't I always wondered why the courting of others made me feel wrong, making me question my own future?

There's a fog around my mind as Rith's own breath comes in a different cadence, his hips pressing

against my backside, eliciting an automatic reaction from my body. Why does this feel so wrong and so right at the same time?

He whines when something wet rubs against me, clearing the fog. *It was always going to be this way, wasn't it?* No matter how hard I denied this thing between us, our fates had already entwined our lives together.

I shouldn't.

It is the instincts inside of me that grow stronger the longer I lay here, telling me that *this* is how it was supposed to be—*this* is where I'm supposed to be.

“Rith.” His name leaves my lips in a whisper, making my face flush.

“I can't stop. You don't understand the hunger I've buried deep inside of me every time you're around me. The war I have within myself to abide by duty and honor.”

His hips thrust, and the mental chastity belt I've forced on myself loosens. I've been just as stubborn, just as strapped to duty and expectations. In the wilds of these woods, where life and death can change in the blink of one moment to the next, mental clarity hits me like the sun after the monsoon season.

How we've tortured ourselves unnecessarily. Rith could have died trying to protect me, and I would have never known who my soulmate was—I would have been sentenced to live a half-life, always yearning for something out of reach, while pretending that the duties placed upon me were wanted and okay.

It's not okay.

Not when the one meant for me has been in front of me this whole time.

“Princess. I need you. You've been the only thing I've ever wanted. The thing I fought so hard for.”

His hips thrust against me and I can feel myself opening up. It's never happened before, and it feels so right. My own yearning flames into hunger, and suddenly I'm thrusting back against him, my wings spreading and lowering themselves to make room.

He growls and purrs, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand and calm at the same time. How can so many conflicting emotions run through me at once?

His purrs overtake his growls the moment his cock rubs against my opening. There's something on the head of it that makes me scared and excited with anticipation. *Is this what all female Kinnara go through?*

“The prettiest. You've been out of reach for so long. Do you feel my longing through your window as you watch me? I feel your eyes bore into my soul every time it's cast my way, and it makes me burn to mount you.”

Dear heavens. His words make my body flame up and want to combust from the inside out.

“To finally have you under me, just like this—it's heaven. A taste of paradise I don't deserve.”

“Rith, *please.*”

He pants against the back of my head, purring louder as his cock prods and finally finds my entrance. I can feel the head against my opening and it's already too much, my skin too sensitive for what's happening. Crawling forward, he growls and gently bites the back of my neck to keep me still. The move makes my pussy weep and open even more, allowing the head of his cock to slip in.

I moan and crawl forward again, feeling his teeth clamp down more firmly. It thrills me. *Should it?* It shouldn't, but it does.

“Kannit.”

I gasp at my name said so informally, and it makes my body push back, burying his cock deeper inside of me, making him groan. His mouth lets me go as his tongue begins to lick at my exposed skin over and over. When he pulls back, I whimper and he purrs, sending vibrations down my back. His hips shoot forward again and he buries himself to the hilt, making me scream. His purrs become louder, his tongue sweeping against my skin harder as his body begins a steady thrusting rhythm that makes me gasp and groan.

“You feel so good.”

“You’re too big. It feels like you’re scraping my insides.”

He groans. “Your mouth makes my balls ache. Dirty little princess, stuck in her tower of jewels.”

I whine on the next slow thrust and he picks up his pace, building pleasure within me.

“Everytime you come to your window, my jealousy rises, thinking you’re looking at anyone else but *me*.” *Thrust. Thrust.* “Do you know how many guards I’ve had to dominate to force myself by your side?”

Oh, heavens. My pussy flowers and opens wider at his confession, weeping with a slickness I’ve never felt before. It makes me feel wanton, something a princess shouldn’t feel.

“Rith. I didn’t—”

He growls against my ear and thrusts harder. “You didn’t know because I made sure *everyone else* knew—you’re mine, and mine alone.”

My breath stutters, my heart elated by everything he’s telling me. *It’s so wrong.*

His thrust becomes faster and my whines turn to moans against the leaves and twigs. Our coming together is so raw, so primal, that I feel something inside of me break free from its confines. The cage I’ve always been held in opens and I can finally let myself just feel ... *alive*.

“You feel so good, Princess.”

“Don’t stop.”

He roars and starts pounding into me, scraping my face against the ground with each thrust. Something sharp drags along my insides, making me gasp and groan. He purrs loudly and it’s the only thing I can concentrate on as he continues to breed me. I shouldn’t want this so badly. I shouldn’t enjoy the fact that a child might come of this mating—but I do. I yearn for it. I crave it like my next breath with each thrust he gives me.

“I didn’t plan on it. You take my cock so well, Princess. You feel so tight.”

Heavens above.

I whine loudly when the head of his cock scrapes too deeply and suddenly Rith thrusts and grinds harder, my pleasure mounting too high for me to handle.

“Too much!”

“*Never.*”

One—two thrusts and he buries himself to the hilt, so deep it feels like it’s crowding my insides. His cock pulsates and sends me into a lust haze, my hand scratching at the dirt, trying to crawl and escape the sensation.

His jaws clamp down on my neck again, grinding his cock deeper inside of me and sending me over the edge of no return, making me cry out in pleasure and pain.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rith

Something breaks open inside of me.

Dragging her limp body into the nest I made her, my possessiveness grows as I push all the leaves around her to create a higher wall to protect her. It's mental, I know, since leaves wouldn't protect anyone. But the instincts inside of me purr in satisfaction as I cover her body with mine, feeling each of her breaths as she slumbers.

I should have never taken advantage of her like that, but I don't regret it one bit. Not when I've finally claimed her the way I should. The nights I've spent pissing around her window only did so much. The other males kept away, but not far enough. It's the reason why my sparring sessions became so aggressive, the reason why I've climbed the ranks so quickly.

My cock unsheathes at the thought of her peering gracefully out her window, looking down at me while I take down other males. It's always made me preen, though she never noticed it. The fact that she's like a star too far to reach only makes me hunger more. My hips thrust of their own accord, the head of my cock seeking comfort with the only person who can give it to me.

I groan against her back when her ass raises up and accepts me inside. The fates play with me with how long they've dangled this treasure in front of me, just out of my grasp. Now that I have it, I'm never going to let her go. Purring against her ear, I rub my face against her as I slip inside. The warmth of her embrace around my cock pricks me with pride and guilt.

"Princess. You're so wet for me."

She gasps and it makes my balls tighten. Her responses and reactions are perfection, driving me with the need to breed her again and again.

"Rith."

I growl at the sound of my name on her lips. It always drove me crazy. Life in the palace has forced me to control my emotions, but out here in the wild, my instincts tell me to claim what's rightfully mine.

She takes me in so sweetly, her little whimpers and whines making the protective, dominant side of me rear its ugly head when I should be making love. I just can't love her the way she deserves when there's threats against our lives in these woods. I need to protect her—need to make sure everyone knows she's off limits.

My hips thrust faster and harder. Princess Kannit doesn't speak any refusals but takes everything I have to give her and it makes me hot, knowing she submits to me like this.

"You want this, don't you? Want to feel me take what's mine and fill this pussy with my seed?"

She groans and it makes her pussy clamp down on my cock even tighter, making me growl and lick her shoulder, marking her with my scent.

"You're mine. Make no mistake that I will kill anyone who tries to take you from me."

"Rith!"

Her pussy flutters and suddenly the tightness of my sack is out of my control, my hips thrusting deeply and shooting jets of my cum inside of her.

We lay there in our nest, panting, letting our bodies come down from the rush of our copulation. My cock slips out of her and she squeals, making me chuckle. I shouldn't. I have nothing to laugh about when I'm sentencing myself to banishment the moment I bring her back home.

Do we have to go home?

No, I can't do that to her. She deserves a life of finery and happiness. What do I have to offer? My mind begins to war with itself, the guilt of everything that's transpired between us eating me alive. I roll away and leave the nest, but Princess Kannit has other ideas.

"What are you doing? Where are you going?"

"I should have never taken advantage of you. You deserve so much more."

"What?"

"We can't do this anymore. We need to make a path back to the palace."

"Rith, you can't—"

Turning, I snap at her. My emotions are tumultuous like a storm, threatening to drown us both.

"We return to the palace."

Her eyes burn with an emotion that makes my skin itch to touch her again. I've never seen this on her face. The calm and collected Princess Kannit looks like she's about to do something she will regret. It turns me on when it shouldn't. Her spirit is shining so bright in her eyes that my cock begins to harden, making me curse under my breath.

I turn away and begin to walk, hoping she will follow me. Something hard hits the back of my head and I roar, pouncing.

Princess Kannit is under me, her eyes alight with fire as she sneers at me. *Sneers! Who is this woman?*

"How dare you do what you did and just leave me!"

My heart races. Something is coursing through me. A new hunger—one that craves the volatile emotions coming off her in waves. Unhinged—unfiltered. Raw. Primal. Her eyes stare into mine and they're finally without pity. This is the princess I know, the one buried deep inside. The one I knew lived there waiting for a beast like me to bring it to the surface. Pride swells in my chest.

Jumping off her, I begin walking again. A few moments in, I hear the sound of her delicate talons following behind me.

I'm being a bastard. *What's wrong with me?* Why are these instincts driving me to push her to her limit?

"Rith!"

I ignore her, my guilt eating away at me as well as the fact that I have to think about what my future holds. What can a monster like me offer a princess? Nothing. It's that fact that rips my heart out as I continue to lead us in a straight direction.

When the trees become more sparse, my heart drops. This is it. The end of our short-lived fairytale. Once we return to our lives, I'll never see her again.

She's also betrothed.

The nails on my paws extend and I stomp on the ground in front of me in silent fury. *How did I forget? How could I have done that to her? I've ruined her!*

Shaking my head, my mane swishes side to side but does nothing to relieve me of the weight on my shoulders over what I've done.

I've tainted her soul with my selfish hunger, my need to claim.

But she's mine. Mine!

Shaking my mane, I dislodge the irrational thoughts haunting me. The woods must have influenced me with its darkness, letting temptation consume me beyond rationality. That *has* to be it.

The trees begin to clear and I'm baffled at how fast we've found our path back from whence we came. Stopping in my tracks, I'm conflicted at what I should do.

“Oh!”

Princess Kannit runs into me, but it doesn't change my position as I continue to stare with longing and disdain at a kingdom that will surely *not* welcome me home as a hero.

My tail wraps around Princess Kannit, trying to prolong the façade of her being mine alone. In the woods, we were free. Here, we're both held in gilded cages. By duty and honor, I need to bring her home.

I can feel the princess pull away from my tail to stand beside me.

We both stare in silence until her footsteps break the tension. She walks forward with grace in silence and I follow her lead.

Whatever life brings us , we must walk towards it with our eyes both open.

CHAPTER NINE

Kannit

My soul cries. It screams at me to turn back. But I'm a princess, and my obligations don't end just because I found myself lost in the woods.

The heavy sense of duty pulls me forward, the sound of Rith's footsteps behind me giving me courage.

"Guards!"

"Is that the princess?"

"Gather the men!"

The Gajasimha protecting our palace comes running, and suddenly, growls erupt. This isn't the reunion I was expecting.

"What is that beast behind her?"

Behind me? Rith?

"Princess! Step away!"

The first guard lunges and I scream. "No!"

They all stop, baffled at my command.

My arms are spread out in front of Rith, my chest heaving at the fear of what might have befallen my guard.

"Princess! Step. Away."

Another guard lunges and Rith roars, a sound that makes me want to scream from fear—for what he might do, and what might happen to him.

"Step away from the princess!"

The Guards are circling us, trying to find an opening to separate me from Rith. It is reminiscent of the Bunian, and it makes my vision black around the edges from the memory.

Suddenly, I'm being hauled away as roars and grunts elicit behind me, a battle I cannot see because Arun is dragging me towards the palace gates so fast I almost trip on my own talons.

"No!"

"The beast has brainwashed you, Princess. It is nothing but evil!"

They don't understand! I need to make them understand! But with everything happening so fast, my voice gets lodged in my throat until I hear my sisters calling out for me.

"Kannit! Where have you been?"

"Kannit!"

"Sopheary! Bouphe!"

My sisters come running, and suddenly I'm buried in a flurry of feathers and embraces, my body being dragged inside as the echoes of roars fade into the background.

"Where is he?"

"What are you talking about? Stop moving, I need to get your dress fitted."

It's been days, and no one will tell me where they're keeping him. Everyone pretends like nothing has happened—pretending he doesn't exist!

When she pulls the gold and violet fabric over my shoulder, I shove her aside unladylike, but my

nerves are getting frayed. The royal seamstress is going to just have to get over it.

“Arrgh!”

My mind is looping images of tortures and pain, watching Rith getting his ears sliced off and his face mutilated, everytime I hear an inkling of a roar. My heart is crying out for him and no one understands!

“I need to go to him!”

“The *yeak*? Why would you want to do that?”

They’ve dubbed him the creature. The giant beast. I’m overwhelmed with emotion, wanting to shake everyone until they come to their senses.

“Kannit. Calm down. The guards are handling the problem. You don’t have to worry about it anymore. What you need to do is worry about this wedding coming up.”

My chest constricts tightly that my sisters are also in the same mindset. They never gave me a chance to explain! They’re all blinded by the finery that surrounds them. The falsity of this surreal life. We’ve been led to believe that this is all there is for females like us. They don’t understand what lies beyond the woods, the horrors and nightmares that haunt my waking hours. I’m not who I once was. I can never be that naïve person again.

My soul is crying and pulling at my insides when another roar rings in the air.

“Kannit! What’s wrong?”

“I need him! Please take me to him!”

“Someone get the medicine man. There’s something wrong with Kannit!”

“No!” My tears turn into full blown sobs as pain stabs me on the inside. I’m crawling towards my window, but it’s too far.

“Kannit!”

My sisters pick me up and drag me back to the heart of the room, placing me on pillows, but I’m in too much pain to fight their arms around me.

“What has happened?” The doctor’s voice rings over my wails, and suddenly, clammy hands are over my forehead.

“*Please.*”

“Get me hot water! And some lime, rice and *tmein*!”

“*Tmein*? We have this?”

“Yes, Mother kept all our baby teeth in a locked box in her bedroom. Go, find it now!”

“What in the world?”

“Do as the medicine man says!”

Hands, hands everywhere. Reality and memories meld together until I don’t know where one begins and one ends. It’s too much! *Get your hands off me!* A chill runs through my spine when fingers dig into the flesh of my upper arm, and I scream.

“Hold her down!”

“Get me sandpaper!”

“What is going on?”

“She’s poisoned. We need to get the poison out of her. It’s an old remedy. Ah, bring it here!”

My mind fogs in and out, and my face feels flushed. I’m weary, my body feeling heavy. *I need to see him. Please, someone! I need to make sure he’s okay.*

The sound of scraping reminds me of the Bunian when they would run their nails against the bark.

The smell of lime fills the air and rice water. Someone lifts me up into a sitting position and a bowl is brought to my mouth.

“Drink. It will make you feel better.”

I don't like this. Shaking my head, I try to bat away what they're forcing on me.

“Princess, you must drink to get rid of the poison!”

I'm crying. Don't they understand that it's not a poison that runs through me, but physical pain in my chest like my heart is being torn from my flesh? My wings flutter when the bowl comes towards my mouth again. The only difference this time is, someone pinches my nose, which forces my mouth open.

The taste is grainy, of raw rice grains. The sourness of the lime doesn't overshadow the taste of something else that's unfamiliar.

I gulp a few times just to get them away from me and splutter when they finally move the bowl.

“Kannit. It's okay. We got you. The medicine should work.”

“If she shows any further signs of distress, please call upon me again.”

“Thank you for helping our sister.”

My tears silently fall down the side of my face as I lay here on opulent pillows, yearning for a beast that's stolen my heart.

CHAPTER TEN

Rith

My insides burn, and it's not from the metal prod they keep poking at me. No matter how much I roar and tell them who I am, no one believes me. *Yeak*. They call me the name of beasts of old.

I've been left down here to rot. The guards have left for over a day. Something is happening and makes me on edge more than I already am. The classical ensemble, the *pinn peat*, plays loudly above me, and I roar. Slamming my body against the chains that bind me, I shake and claw at the ground until my nail beds bleed.

Hear me! Whoever is watching over me! Ancestors, I need to break free!

Slamming my body against the chains, the creak spurs me on. The sound of the music is followed by cheers and my heart beats out of my chest. *No!*

"Arrrrgh!" The next body slam pulls the chains from the stone wall and the momentum throws me forward towards the stairs to the upper halls. The clinking of the metal against stone isn't enough to catch attention when the music gets louder the closer I get to the main area of the palace.

"Ahhh!"

"It's the *yeak*! Gather more men!"

My feet quicken, bringing me to an opulent hall decorated in violets, blues and golds.

"Ahhh!"

"*Yeak!*"

The sound of their cries and screams of horror fade into the back when my eyes focus on the dark blue feathers that peek from beneath violet and gold fabrics, hiding her true self from the world.

"Get away from her!" My voice is gravelly, reminiscent of the angry beast they've all dubbed me as.

The royal council—another Kinnara, Moc—turns to me with a look of fear. It drives me harder, calling to my instincts to chase and hunt down the threat against what's rightfully mine.

"Guards!"

"Protect the princess! Protect the King!"

Roaring, my head is jerked back hard enough by the collar and chain that my body slams on the floor in a loud crunch. The pain only grounds me as I twist and turn until the chain is loosened in the guards' claws enough for me to get back on my feet and lunge again. Something sails past me, and the crowd scatters and screams.

"No!" Her voice calls to my soul, the void in my chest making me fight harder against the guards.

She cries and runs towards me, only to have Moc grab her by the midsection and haul her back. My eyes zone in on where he touches her and I roar in anguish. The smell of copper surrounds me as my claws swipe left and right to rid myself of the obstacle that prevents me from getting to her.

Her face changes. Her eyes never leave mine. She flutters and uses her talons to kick Moc away, falling on her face against the stone steps of the dais.

"No! Get away from me! I need to get to her! Kannit!" Are they all blinded by what's happening? Look at her!

She lifts her head, the blood flowing down her nostrils, and begins to scramble towards me, ignoring the commands from her father and guards.

When she gets close enough, I shoulder against the closest guard, toppling him. Jumping over his body, I run towards her, only to have a spear lodge itself into my side.

“*Rith! NO!*”

My body falls against the marble, making me groan. Pushing myself to my paws, I crawl towards her to eliminate the last remaining distance separating us. My tusk hooks with the spear and pulls it out, ripping my flesh with the metal head.

The crowd quiets, the silence heavy as Princess Kannit throws her arms around me and cries.

“Please. You can’t! *I need him! I love him!*”

My breath stutters and my paws pull her beneath me so that my body can protect her from any backlash we might receive. Love was never a privilege we were meant to have, but love is the only thing worth dying for.

“Rith?”

“Is that what she said?”

“How can that *yeak* be Rith?”

Princess Kannit’s hands cradle my face, pulling me against hers as she presses her lips against my worst scars. Nuzzling her neck, I soak in her scent and the feel of her skin. If this is to be the last day of life, let it be in her arms.

“Rith.”

“I love you, Princess Kannit. You were always the light that kept me living. I would lay my life down for you, love you until my dying breath.”

“No, Rith. Don’t say those things. I choose life, Rith. Life. *With you*. I love you.”

“How can you love a *yeak*? A beast? I don’t deserve you, but I also cannot let you go. You’re mine.”

Another voice cuts through our moment, making me snap my head up and snarl in possessiveness.

“*Yeak.*”

“She’s mine! I will not let you have her!”

“Please, Pa.”

“This is what you choose then, daughter? A beast over a man?”

She cries and buries her face against my furs. My instincts to protect ramp up, making my skin itch with anticipation for what I might have to do—even if it’s against my own king.

He watches, doesn’t move. His eyes roam, but his face never gives a hint as to what he might be thinking.

“The giant beast with his relentless drive, never willing to give up.” His eyes flick to Kannit and I growl in warning. “Even if it means his death.”

“Pa, I love him! Please do not make me marry! I cannot! My soul has already been tied. It hurts to be away from him, hurts too much.”

Gasps can be heard around us. Then a heavy silence.

“It’s true then? You’ve found your mate in a feral beast?”

“He is not a beast! He is Rith!”

The king’s eyes glint with something in his reticence. The hairs on the back of my neck all the way up to my mane stand on end.

“Guards, stand down.” His voice is steady, commanding.

What is happening? I do not trust it.

The king takes a step forward and my body curls over Kannit even more. A smirk graces his face and it confuses me.

“A love as far as heaven and earth, yet one cannot be without the other. Daughter, I only wish I understood what you have. Not many of us are so lucky.”

My hairs flatten as I rub my chin over her head. Her golden crown pokes at me, but I do not care. The feeling of my female safe in my arms settles my soul like no other.

The King straightens and looks over us, addressing the people as a whole.

“It seems the fates have had a hand in meddling. Let it be known from this day forth, our Princess Kannit is now one with ...”

Her hands pet my tusk and I inadvertently purr in response. Clearing my throat, I answer the king boldly. “Rith Seang of Kampong.”

“...Rith Seang of Kampong. Your grandfather fought for me in the last battle brought to our palace. Let us have a word with one another after the wedding ceremony.”

“What? Pa, I’m not going to marry Moc.”

“Kannit. Your souls have evidently already spoken for each other. You are going to marry Rith.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you get your kicks in a magical manner, order toys from websites like bad dragon, and prefer your monsters *in* your bed instead of *under* them, then Y. D. is your girl.

Writing everything from spicy dark fantasy to fluffier-than-a-cool-marshmallow romance, Y.D. La Mar has her fingers in all sorts of man-meat pie, and the sky is the limit. Somehow, this magical mistress manages to balance her spicy author life with her responsibilities as a mom, a wife, and a resident of Sin City—*oh, irony, you've felled me.*

When the world is full of black-and-white, Y.D. plays in the grey zones, spending her time creating new ways to shock and awe her editor, as well as her readers.

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BLURB

I was only six when I met him, the monster in my wood.

A wolverine is an ungodly form of dire wolf that walks on two legs. They are beastly, larger, and more ferocious than a wolf shifter, and if only some tales about them are true, then my fate is desperate indeed.

Only he is none of those things.

He lets me nestle upon his lap.

He listens to my stories.

Until one day, he disappears.

Many years pass, and war consumes our lands.

Fleeing for my life, my sweet monster rescues me... at least I thought he did.

Then he tells me the truth.

“Foolish human,” he says in a deep, rumbling voice. “I wasn’t rescuing you. I was capturing you for myself.”

Themes: size difference, knotting, dirty-talking monster, breeding kink!

PROLOGUE

North of our village is a path that leads into Hopton Wood. If you walk too far, you'll find yourself in Blackwood, aptly named because the trees all have black bark, although the leaves are a vibrant green.

A young lad named Peter, who lived two doors down, took to playing in Blackwood, catching frogs, and other things. The problem with Blackwood is it holds pathways into another world. You might think you're walking through Blackwood, but you've already crossed to another realm full of monsters, fairies, goblins, centaurs, bears that can shift into humans, and humans that can change into wolves. All manner of creature lives in Blackwood. Occasionally, children wander into places they shouldn't, like Peter, who disappeared last autumn and was never seen again.

I wouldn't go into Blackwood, not me. I'm a good girl who helps my mother with chores and rarely misbehaves. Today, though, the sun is bright as I walk through Hopton Wood, and I find myself at the boundary. I sit down on the ground within the shelter of a giant oak tree.

Opposite me, the trees have unmistakable black bark. My tummy gets full of jitters just thinking about how close I am...like I might see a monster...Mama says the monsters can't come out, but I still feel a dangerous kind of thrill. I shouldn't be here. I'm not usually one for courting danger, but something draws me. As I sit in the shade of the old oak tree, I wonder about the other world mere paces away. It's warm and comfortable, and I rest my head against the tree trunk, straighten out my dress, and let my eyes drift shut. I imagine having an adventure on the other side of the boundary and making friends with a wolf. He would be my best friend and protect me from the other monsters while we played together. As I submerge into the dreamscape, something tickles my hand. My eyes flutter open to find a butterfly sitting there. I smile.

Then I freeze, finding *him* staring back at me. Is he a wolf? I blink. Am I still dreaming?

But he cannot possibly be a wolf, for he stands on two feet. He doesn't move, seeming as transfixed by my appearance as I am by his. Slowly, I sit up a little straighter, my heart racing wildly. A distance separates us of no more than twenty paces.

"What are you?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, just stares at me with a stillness that unnerves me. Could he leap across and eat me? *Wolven*, I have heard the village elders speak of them on story nights. Certainly, he is large enough. He must be twice my size, with thick, shaggy black fur glistening in the dappled sunlight. His eyes are amber and bright against the blackness of the wood. He is beautiful, magnificent, like a wolf standing on two feet, impossibly broad shoulders, and powerful underneath all his fur.

Then I notice his big, bushy tail swing from side to side. I smile. "You are so beautiful," I say a little wistfully, wanting very much to pet him.

He chuffs in response, and I laugh, deciding he can understand me.

I start when he moves, but he only takes a seat opposite me and leans against the tree where he watches.

"How did you get here?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

I frown. "You should go back," I say. If the villagers saw him, even as strong as he obviously is, they would hunt him down and kill him. "Lest villagers find you and send for the watch to attack you."

He makes the funny chuffing noise again, making me think he does not fear the villagers or their

pitchforks.

The butterfly that tickled my hand dances upon the light breeze from one flower to the next, drifting toward the wolverine. I have a strange notion that it will disappear if it tries to cross the boundary between our worlds.

As it settles on his ankle, I swallow. The butterfly crossed. Is it now trapped there forever? It dances onto his shoulder. He turns and chuffs at it, and the butterfly takes off once more to flight, fluttering across flowers until it returns to my side and disappears into Hopton Wood.

There is no barrier between us. He is really here.

I rise, and he tracks the movement. He chuffs. That chuff says *no*.

"The butterfly came," I point out. "Why can't I?" I take a tentative step forward. "You won't hurt me." I don't know how I know this, but it is true. Perhaps he holds otherworldly power and has cast a spell upon me, and I am now his willing slave. Is this how children disappear? Maybe he is not a wolverine, but a witch. Yet I am walking forward, and he is an unnatural kind of still.

He chuffs twice in quick succession. Another warning I do not heed.

My steps walk me forward until I am beside him, close enough to touch should I reach out.

"Are you a wolverine?" Now I am before him, his size, even sitting, is daunting, yet I am not afraid. I want to pet him, to find out if his fur is as soft and fluffy as it looks. I imagine how it would feel under my fingers.

A howl sounds in the distance, and we both turn that way.

My hand falls back to my side, my heart pounding. He chuffs and nods his head toward Hopton Wood. *Go*, he seems to say.

"What is it?" I ask. "What is coming?"

His next chuff is aggressive, and I take an unsteady step backward.

The howling sounds again, louder, and closer.

Then he lifts his head and howls in answer.

I turn and flee, running all the way back along the path for the village, not stopping until I am home. Shaken, I charge into my bedroom and squeeze under the bed where I keep my special make-believe nest. There is a cushion and an old blanket. I often play here, imagining it is a secret part of a castle.

"Ivy?" my mother calls. "Is that you?"

"Yes, Mama! I am playing castles."

My heart is racing, and I must gulp deep breaths.

"Okay, love," she says, and I hear the smile and normality in her voice. "I've got some cookies fresh from the oven. Would you like one with a glass of milk?"

"Okay," I say because I love cookies very much, and she only makes them once a week. "I'll be out soon."

Her footsteps fade away, and I try to steady the frantic beating of my heart. I can't tell Mama. She'll be cross and will never let me play there again. He wasn't going to hurt me. He was warding me away.

The following day, I go again, only he doesn't appear, nor the next. I go every day for a month. I begin to lose hope, but then, after the full moon, I find him sitting against the tree in the exact same spot, rising slowly as he sees me.

"You came," I say.

He chuffs, and I catch a glimpse of sharp, white teeth.

"Is it safe?"

His chuff is one of encouragement. *Yes, it is safe*, he says, his big, bushy tail slowly wagging.

I am not the only one to move forward this time, for so does he. As we reach a place between the two worlds, we sit down upon the grassy forest floor.

"Can I touch you?" I ask.

He chuffs, *yes*, and as he holds out his arm, I note the wicked-looking claws at his fingertips.

I reach toward it, half expecting him to disappear, but he doesn't, and my fingers meet the softest, most decadent fur. I gasp, happy. "You are so beautiful," I say in wonder. "I wish you could speak. I wish you could tell me what you are."

His chuff sounds indignant.

I giggle. I'm only six years old and don't know much about anything, except maybe cookies and checking the chickens for eggs.

No howl interrupts us today, and I talk to him, telling him about the village, about my make-believe place underneath the bed. He chuffs if I go quiet to encourage me to carry on. When the sun begins to sink, and I must be returning home, I ask, "Will I see you again?"

His chuff says, *yes*.

And so it is that we meet most days. Although he never speaks to me, I like to believe he understands. I grow bolder as I talk, and before long, I have taken to settling upon his lap.

Days turn into seasons until one day, he stops coming. I often return, but never see him again. As time passes, and as I turn from a child into a young woman, I wonder if I really met him or simply imagined him.

Time dims memories, and he is relegated to the sweet monster in my dreams.

Then war comes, and there is no more time for dreams.

CHAPTER ONE

War.

It comes relentlessly, like a storm lashing the people of Hopton Wood. We pick ourselves up, broken pieces that we must cobble together into society and hope. But hope fades one brutal incursion at a time until it feels as though the parts may never be whole again.

They are gone.

Everyone I ever knew and loved, save my brother, who still fights with the watch.

"Go, Ivy," he said, sword gripped in his bloody hand as the insurgents swarmed the village. *"Run, as fast and as far as you can. Survive. That is all you can do. I will find you, Goddess willing, when this is done."*

A sob tearing from my throat, I run. On and on, over rough forest floor carpeted with thick ferns, running further still until exhaustion pulls me down.

Trembling, I shelter at the base of a giant oak tree. Inside I am as numb as my body is outwardly cold. I might die here, I realize, and cannot yet summon a will to care. I have run far. My home and the ruin of my community are far away. I worry about my brother, although he is a brave and fearsome warrior. Dark memories chase me into the dark of the night. Shivers rack my body, yet it is a howl that rouses me sharply to alert.

I take stock of my situation, my gown tattered and torn and splattered in mud from my mad flight, while a bone-deep lethargy enthuses my body. I rise to my feet, hand bracing the tree behind me. Another howl and I turn to my right, orienting myself upon the sound. Around me is darkness and the thick canopy of trees.

The sound is familiar...like I have heard it before in my dreams.

It's only now that I take in the color of the bark. Black. When I left, I headed east, but my wild flight must have me north, and I have crossed over the sacred boundary that separates our world from theirs.

I have run all the way into Blackwood.

My breath stutters, and I turn full circle. Another howl sounds, and another, this time, closer. Fear is a hand closing over my throat, stifling my ability to draw air into my lungs.

"No!" I say, determined that I shall not fall prey to the beasts of Blackwood. I think of my brother, still fighting on. I cannot give up, not until there is no hope left at all. I glance upward, assessing the branches of a tall tree under which I have sought shelter. They are thick, sturdy, and evenly spaced out. Can I climb? Would it help me if I did? The decision is taken from me when a prickling sensation settles between my shoulder blades. I spin around, and a wave of almost crippling fear skittles down my spine.

A wolverine, an ungodly form of dire wolf that walks on two legs. They are beastly, larger, and more ferocious than a wolf shifter, and if only some tales about them are true, then my fate is desperate indeed.

And yet, it stirs up strange memories. Dark, shaggy fur that does not disguise his power, he prowls forward, a rattling growl rising from his chest. Unlike a wolf shifter, he is bipedal and stands impossibly tall at twice my height. I want to believe the memories, to believe he is a friend, but he radiates a menace that slices through my dreams as effectively as his lethal claws could cut through me. This monster before me is nothing like the sweet one who let me nestle upon his lap. Perhaps he

is not the same wolverine. Perhaps I imagined that other version, after all.

I think of my brother, a sword in his hand, of him telling me to run far and fast and that I must survive. The enemy was coming. We could hear them in the distance.

I escaped that fate.

I will not end like this, not now. I cannot climb the tree quickly. He is too close. But what else? To run? No, he would catch me. Happen one leap and he could be upon me, his mighty jaws snapping my neck.

A sturdy branch rests beside my feet, and I crouch, fumbling for it while keeping my focus on the wolverine. He chuffs before he lifts his snout to the air, sniffing.

That chuff?

Then he throws his head back and howls, a terrifying sound I feel all the way to my core and deep in my belly. Hairs spring to attention across my chilled skin. The branch is heavy and solid in my hand as I rise, although I am trembling so hard I must double down on my grip, lest I drop my only means of defense.

A howl sounds in the distance. Does he come with a pack?

The wolverine throws a glance over his shoulder. I take the opportunity to turn and run, my weapon still clasped in my hand.

A snarl and the heavy thud of beastly footfall chase me, making my heart pound heavy through my veins, making my breath turn into a pant. I am already exhausted from escaping my ruined village, yet the fear of death lends me new power, and I sprint along the forest path. Another distant howl is followed by growling, low and vicious, and a yelp of pain.

Goddess, save me! Are they fighting among themselves?

I stumble over a root in the dark, pitch into the air, and land in a clearing where a sprawling oak tree has fallen, leaving a break in the tree canopy. Moonlight spills over the fern-covered forest floor, and I stagger up, only to discover no obvious path out.

I turn to find the wolverine leaping straight for me.

By reflex, I raise my branch weapon, brandishing it tightly in both hands. My death seems inevitable as time stretches and my mind turns gloriously blank.

Twisting at the last moment, he closes his teeth over the branch, shaking me along with it before I release it. I fall onto my knees, numb as he snaps and crunches his powerful jaws over the wood, spitting out the shattered remains in a rain of chips all over me.

Suddenly, he pivots on the spot. On my knees, I cower behind him as he issues a ferocious growl.

Only it is not me that he growls at. Rising, I peer around him to find many pairs of bright blue eyes, wolf eyes, edging the small clearing. Not wolverines, for they are on four legs, but not wolves either, for while they are in animal form. They are too large for a natural wolf. Shifters? I believe that they are.

The wolverine shows no allegiance to them, but nor do they back away. Then his lips curl to reveal sharp, gleaming teeth as he emits another deep, rattling growl.

Is he about to fight?

The central wolf steps forward, lifts his nose, and sniffs. He begins prowling back and forth, issuing a low-rattling growl, one that the wolverine returns. Other wolves step forward, poking snouts into the clearing. One feints an attack, then another charges us from the opposite side.

I scream. The wolverine lunges left, movement lightning fast to snatch up the wolf who dared to try to flank us. Lethal claws spring, and he swings, sending the wolf tumbling. Another wolf leaps, and he

closes jaws over the wolf's throat.

He shakes. Blood splatters, and a sickening yip of pain accompanies the shifter being tossed to the floor.

My heart pounds furiously. Dead, the wolf shifter is dead, evidenced by the blood pooling around him and the still nature of his body.

The wolves attack all at once, charging, snapping, and snarling. I cower against the fallen tree as the violent dance plays out around me. Death, I have seen too much death, the war, the constant conflict, fighting, and killing. The brutality has consumed my life these past years, chipping away at everything I am, one piece at a time. And now, here I am, in the midst of a supernatural battle.

The wolven holds his ground against a dozen wolves who circle and snap, feinting, charging, and sometimes biting or clawing the wolven who stands before me.

A skittering of claws against wood behind alerts me, but too late as teeth grasp the back of my dress. I scream as the wolf drags me backward. The wolven swings his great clawed fist, raking the side of the wolf holding me.

Released, I drop to the forest floor. But the fight turns more savage still. The wolves attack as one, closing in, teeth tearing into flesh, and although my protector shakes them off, he is wounded and bloody.

On and on, the attack goes as they try to lure the wolven away so that they can snatch me. There are many wolves and only one wolven. But they are falling too, yipping and yelping as he metes out his punishment until several lay dead.

But my protector is gravely wounded, and it seems as though the outcome might go either way.

The lead wolf is taken down in a blur of fury, his body sent flying against a tree. He rises and shakes his head. With a sharp yip to his pack, they back away.

The quietness is deafening. They slip back into the forest, turn, and run.

My eyes are stretched so wide they hurt. I blink and swallow past the tightness in my throat as I take in the scene. Four wolves lay dead upon the forest floor, while the wolven is bleeding heavily, panting, chest heaving as he stands over the nearest body. Lifting his snout to the night sky, he emits a long, piercing howl.

A shiver runs through my body as his head swings back toward me. My chest contracts on a sharp breath as I see the terrible wounds the wolves have wreaked upon his once proud body.

It is him, I know it. My wolven, who has just saved me from a terrible fate. I stumble forward, my feet heavy and hand outstretched, wanting to touch him and yet not quite able to broach that last distance. I come to a stop. My hand falls back to my side, and a heavy sob breaks from my throat.

"Oh, look at you," I say. "Look what they have done."

He sits abruptly, his big shoulders drooping, and his breath a rapid pant.

Lower lip quivering and eyes stinging with tears and sorrow, I go to him. This time, my trembling hand reaches without hesitation to touch the side of his snout. Turning at the last moment, his big tongue licks over my hand before butting against it with his head.

As my fingers curl into his soft fur, tears begin to trickle down my face. "Can you heal?" I ask. He doesn't answer. But he never did, so why would I expect him to now?

Blood drips from a savage gash to his shoulder, his snout is bloody, and his beautiful fur matted in places from the battle. But he represents safety. I cannot begin to know where he has been all these years, but I crave connection in this shadowed moment where I am so alone. As I fall to my knees

before him, he opens his arms, allowing me to bury my chilled body against his warm, soft fur.

"I wish I knew your name," I say. "Why did you stop coming? What happened?"

Still, I receive no answer, but I never expected one. His chest rises, and he emits a deep, rumble purr when it next falls. It soothes my battered soul and instills a sense of calm.

I fall asleep cocooned in his protection and wake up being carried in his arms.

A wave of dizziness assaults me as I see the blur of trees whipping by as he runs along the narrow path. Dawn is breaking, and the thick wood around us is more shadows than light.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

He doesn't spare me a glance, just continues at his steady gait. "I know that you can understand me. I can walk." Walk, yes, this rapid pace, probably not for very far.

He makes a derogatory chuffing noise.

"Thank you for rescuing me."

His laughter is deep, resonant, and halfway toward a growl. I'm not sure why he's laughing, but it warms me all the same. Then his head lowers, his bright amber eyes alight upon me. "Foolish human," he says in a deep, rumble voice. "I wasn't rescuing you. I was capturing you for myself."

CHAPTER TWO

He must anticipate that I will struggle because he is ready, and my weak fight doesn't trouble him. All my thrashing achieves is to see me tossed over his shoulder for easy transportation to wherever this beast is taking me.

"Put me down!" I wail. "I can't believe you can talk! Oh, all this time!"

His deep, rumbling laughter follows, and his arm tightens over the back of my legs, holding me securely in place.

"Be still, foolish, little Ivy, lest you hurt yourself with your thrashing."

"I-oh!" He swats my ass. "Unhand me at once!"

He doesn't unhand me, nor does he slow his pace. Where once I nestled in his arms, cushioned from the thud of his feet against the loamy forest floor, now I feel every step pounded into my belly and ribs.

I fight and wrestle.

He speeds up, and I am forced to cling to him, lest I bounce from his shoulder and crash to the forest floor.

Indignation wars with fear, and fear with deep, desperate sorrow that I believed him to be my savior when he is anything but. How could I have been so foolish? The regal creature who saved me from the wolves is long gone. Now there is only a monster who has taken me for himself.

The absence of movement rouses me, and I jerk to awareness. Beneath me is a vast fur-covered pallet bed. Finding the wolven towering over me, I scramble backward until my back hits a wall, bringing my flight to an abrupt stop. I'm in a cave of some kind, circular stone walls and a high, craggy ceiling above. An oil lamp hangs from a hook and emits a weak glow. I don't mind my setting for more than the moment it takes to understand where I am, for the beast before me captures all my attention.

The blood is gone, and his fur is damp and fluffy. I consider how soft it looks even as my temper rises that he duped me. "What are you going to do with me?" I ask, lips trembling.

His mouth opens, seeming to tug up on one side in the manner of a smirk. "My name is Balen," he says. "And I am keeping you."

"Keeping me?" I shake my head vigorously. "You cannot keep me!" All those times we met when I was a child, never once did he speak, never once did he gift me his name.

Balen heaves a breath, and it emits a sweet purr when he exhales.

"Oh! What are you doing?" Instantly, I soften, and a strange warmth kicks off in my belly, and I press my hand there like it might settle the butterflies taking flight. "You are assuredly cheating."

His laughter is swift and mixes with the purr into a deep, rumbling sound, while his big, bushy tail swishes from side to side. He crouches, coming down over me, making me aware, as if I could forget, of his terrifying size. "There, little Ivy. Let us divest you of this filthy clothing, so that I might clean you all up." Hand upon my ankle, Balen tugs me into the center of the fur-covered bed.

His voice is doing unwelcome things to me, making my tummy clench and nerves deep in my pussy flutter to life. "Please stop purring."

"Never," he says, getting one giant hand upon my upper arm and pinning me still. The middle finger

on his other hand springs a single lethal claw. "Stay very still, sweet little human, lest I harm this pretty flesh as I remove these unnecessary clothes."

I freeze as this hooked claw catches the neckline of my ruined dress...and drags downward. The material slips, exposing the swell of my breast. Big tail sweeping side to side, his purr deepens, and his amber eyes follow the passage of his claw, shredding the garment all the way to the hem. Breath turning choppy, I lay perfectly still as his beastly claw returns to my chest and slowly scrapes across the skin until it catches the edge of the material, pulling it away, exposing my right breast to his hooded gaze.

"So pretty," he rumbles and, lowering his snout, laps the underside of my breast to the stiff peak of my nipple.

I squirm as his rough tongue sends a tingle from my breast all the way to my pussy.

"You taste delicious," Balen says, voice deep and rumble as he takes another long, leisurely lick. This time applying a little force as he reaches my nipple, making it harden as the nerves flare to heated life. "But you have gotten a little dirty from your time in the woods, and I will need to clean you all up."

His determination of how he shall clean me is soon realized as he takes another broad sweep of his tongue over my breast, managing to catch my nipple again, making it even harder. He takes his time, lavishing attention on me, and all the while, I twitch and fidget and grow restless until I am impatient for his attention on the other side.

Only he doesn't tend to the other side. No, he begins to lap over my collarbone and up my throat, and every lap has a further gentling influence. "I can wash myself," I say, although I do not hate what he does, and worse, anticipate when his tongue might find those delicate places that make me squirm.

"You were always for me. I left because I had to, but I watched you even then, watched you bloom into a woman, one I determined would be for me," he continues, as his big tongue rims the shell of my ear, making me shiver. "And my tending will work upon you, my skittish mate."

"M-mate?" My words are cut off as he laps over my lips. He tastes like cloves, sharp and tangy, and it is the most natural thing to let my tongue meet with his. The deepening of his purr lights a fire low in my belly. This is a wolverine, my wolverine. I know him even as I fear this sudden change in the role he assumes.

For so long, I abandoned thoughts of him, relegated them to a distant corner of my mind and a simpler time before war spread across our land.

I grow evermore restless as his tongue sweeps down to find my left breast. It is only now that I realize he is not holding me anymore. Rather, I have buried my fingers in the soft pelt at the back of his neck and hold him to me.

"Yes, mate," Balen rumbles against my breast. "I must become familiar with your scent and taste, just as you must become familiar with me. You do not mind what I do, quite the contrary, your aroused perfume rises for me."

I swallow. "You are bewitching me."

"And you are bewitching me," he counters. I am flipped onto my belly, and his big tongue makes a trail down my spine, tickling me all the way to my ass, and I twitch anew.

"This isn't proper!" I say.

He doesn't mind me, just grasps my thighs in huge beastly hands, hauls me up and swipes his tongue the length of my drenched pussy from behind.

"Umnnn!" I fist the furs beside my face and try to stifle the glorious surge ripping through my body as his thick tongue laps all around my pussy and dips into my core. His rumbling purr is halfway to a growl, and that only makes me wetter.

And then he stops and releases me.

I collapse against the soft fur, confused, sucking deep breaths into my lungs.

"Say you are my mate."

I throw a look over my shoulder, trying to recover wits from the spell he has cast upon me. "No!"

He growls, and grasping my thighs once again, he lifts me to his snout, where he begins his torment again. This time, he sets his target upon my swollen clit, stirring needy whimpers from my throat as my body climbs unerringly toward an inevitable climax.

"Goddess, please!" I have no idea what I beg for, only that I need something to ease this ache.

He stops again, turns me over onto my back, and crowds down over me.

"I can do this all day, little Ivy. You think I don't know what you need? Your body is ripe, and your pussy is weeping for me. You have responded to my call. You are going into heat."

I tremble on hearing his determination. Only now does the truth of my situation manifest upon me. I am naked and alone, at the mercy of a giant monster who stole me from Blackwood.

"You crossed over the sacred boundary. Entered my world. I killed four members of the Silver Creek Pack for you," he continues, beastly hand cupping my breast with proprietary intent. "Before the Goddess, you are mine."

My chest heaves, and my eyes lower over his broad chest covered in soft fur, over firm abdominals, and onto where his huge cock has already pushed out from the lightly furred sheath, bright pink, and smooth, the tip tapered. I swallow. No, Balen cannot mean to...it cannot possibly fit.

I shake my head. "We are not compatible," I say, although my pussy begins to throb, and I convince myself that we *could* fit.

His answer is to tear the remnants of my dress from me and use them to secure my wrists together. I struggle. It does me no good. He is too strong, and with my wrists bound, he secures them against a ring embedded in the wall above my head.

"Please!" I shake my head. Fear cannot take hold against the potent arousal coursing through me.

"Yes," he says, voice a low rumble. When I was a child, I wished for his voice, for his words. Now they have a different effect upon me, one that makes my body quiver and strain under a heady kind of pleasure.

He takes my hips in his hands and lifts them from the furs. I think he will rut me, but he holds my weeping core to his mouth like he an offering. It is far more intimate now that I'm facing him. My pussy clenches even before he takes up the first long lick. His growl holds satisfaction. His tongue is everywhere, licking and lapping, teeth nibbling, driving me to the height of carnal pleasure. I tug on the binding, but the truth is I don't want to escape. I just want some control back.

He is not giving it to me.

As his thick, sinuous tongue gets all up inside me, I swear I see stars. I twitch and clench over the invasion. He lavishes me with intimate attention and nonsense pours from my lips. I beg, although I know not what I beg for.

Goddess, the sensations are intense. I've had lovers in the village, a few stolen moments between the chaos of battle. Snatches of joy, for who would wed when the world is at war?

But this is nothing like those fumbled couplings, those brief moments where I sought to find a

connection but never really did. This is fierce, an all-consuming bliss that steals my every sense. Tears leak from the corners of my eyes. The moment holds an intensity I have never felt before. Balen is a beast, a monster, a wolverine. I am utterly at his mercy, and I have never felt more alive. His tongue swipes up, the flat length seeming to lash everywhere all at once. But then, I feel him lap around my clit. I am so very close. My breath stutters. The beast stops, and I sob at the denial as he trails his snout along my inner thigh.

I tremble uncontrollably in the wake.

"Tell me I am your mate," he says.

What little resolve and reservation I hold weakens. Why do I deny this? Yet how can it be so? I'm a human. Balen is a monster, only he is not a monster to me, not really. He never has been and never will be. He lowers me to the bed, leans over me, and lapses his tongue all around my breast. His clawed fingers settle over my pussy, cupping me intimately, making sure all the sensitive nerves remain alive and alert. I can feel how wet I am. Somehow, him holding me there emphasizes everything. He grinds the heel of his hand against my swollen clit, and then holds me again, pinning me against the furs as he lavishes attention upon my breasts.

I know him; I always have. I want to ask him why he disappeared. Why did he never come back? He said he left because he had to, but I felt his absence too keenly.

Only now, as my pleasure spirals do I wonder if he was always there but hidden in the shadows.

Suddenly, I am convinced that he was. Yesterday when I fled, he was waiting to protect me.

"I am your mate," I say. "Please, make me so. Fill me. Take this terrible ache away."

He stops, snout lifting, and his beautiful amber eyes appear to whirl as he gazes down at me.

I tug upon the binding holding me, wanting to touch him. His eyes shift to where I am bound before returning to meet mine.

"This is going to be rough on your poor, human body," he says, and my stomach flip-flops at his determination. "But you will take me."

I swallow thickly as he brings his sticky fingers to his lips and carefully licks and laps them clean, purr deep, rumbling, and full of satisfaction. Bright eyes hooded, he places his hands at my hips, claw-tipped fingers reaching around to span my waist. They tremble, and somehow, that tells me in a way words never could how much this moment means to him.

I have questions, but those questions are not for now. Now there is only a blazing need.

Heat.

I feel it coursing through me, taking away fears and replacing them with a fever. Balen said I was going into heat, and this restless urgency building inside, this all-consuming need to be filled by this male before me, speaks of it. My chest rises and falls unsteadily, perspiration breaking out across my skin.

I recognize how incomplete I am in this state. The only important thing is to be claimed and filled. Only by joining with him will I find my true self.

My eyes roam over his body until they are arrested by the sight of his cock, long, thick, and bright. Toward the base is an angry swelling—his knot.

I heave a ragged breath.

It makes his cock twice as wide, and that is notwithstanding the full length and girth. The skin is smooth and nothing like a man's, for it weeps copiously to aid his coupling with me.

"Sweet Ivy," he says. "You will always be mine."

"I will," I say.

The tapered tip is leveled against my entrance, sinking just a little way inside, stretching me most enticingly. The intimacy of the moment breaks through the fever. We are joining and, in doing so, will fill the empty hole within me.

He sinks deeper. My pussy flutters, strains to open, and flutters again. Panic and anticipated release war with one another. I want him, but there is so much of him. Yet the determined set of his beastly jaw tells me there can be no retreat from this.

He leans into me, coming down over me, surrounding my tiny form with his huge one, surging deeper with deliberate slowness. My hands try to lower, needing to touch him. I groan, remembering that I am restrained, my pussy squeezing around his invasion.

"That's my sweet little human," he says, sinking ever deeper. "All trapped and helpless before her beastly mate. This hot little cunt gushing and milking my cock, encouraging me to rut, will be well ruined when I have finished with you."

I whimper with need.

"Do you want that?" he demands.

I nod, mesmerized by his voice even as I am alarmed by the stretch my pussy is forced to give. There is no escaping this. The pressure builds as he fills me, surging until his knot nestles against my entrance, and there is no intimate place that does not quiver. Here he holds, and I can feel him flexing inside. He heaves a deep breath and, on an exhale, begins a deep, rumbling purr. I soften, my pussy softens, and he withdraws, making me whimper, my inner muscles clenching and my legs wrapping around him like I might somehow hold this strong male in. Out and out until just the very tip snags my entrance. As he sinks back, I arch my neck and cry out at the sweet, sinful joy that ripples along my channel.

He begins to rut, slow, steady thrusts that soon gather pace. I rise swiftly toward culmination, so slick that our bodies slap wetly together. And I am taking him, impossible as that seems. His eyes are a brilliant amber as he stares down at me, holding my gaze, his beautiful tail high and proud behind him. My jaw hangs slack, and I pant, a flush covering my body, setting a prickling under the surface of my skin.

His knot sinks a little way in, and his claws prick against my waist as he holds me perfectly still.

"Open for me," he says. "Let me give you my knot. Let me mate with you."

I groan as it breaches my entrance with every thrust before popping back out again. I feel him so completely inside, the tapered tip forcing deep, bringing a sharp squeal to my lips.

I tug the binding. "It's too deep."

"Open," he commands. He doesn't stop. I sense he *can't* stop.

My cries turn guttural as my body and mind catapult into a dark kind of rapture. I want to escape this rough coupling, yet I am drenched and rising once again, fearing, and yet the sweet pulsing thrill as his knot pushes all the way in counters the too deep penetration of the tip. Cries turning hoarse, I am forced to yield, my slick spattering over the furs as pain and pleasure suffuse me. But the pleasure wins, and the pain fades into a sharp, visceral longing for *more*.

Breath stuttering, my pussy clenches over his thrusting rod, spinning me, setting me convulsing and gripping, begging him with my body to come and fill me as my climax takes me.

"I claim you," Balen says. "I claim you as my mate."

Deep inside my womb, I feel the first hot jets fill me, and welcome the sting as his sharp teeth nip

and hold the juncture of my shoulder and throat as I squeeze over him in rhythmic waves.

My heart beats steady, and I float, lost in the euphoria of being complete. He rocks, bathing my womb in hot seed, filling me completely. His purr rises, while inside, I feel him flex and jet yet more cum.

"Grip me," he commands, fingers petting the swollen nub of my clit. He is too rough, but I am high on him and what he does, and I splinter into another dizzying climax. He doesn't stop. I twitch and jerk. "Come again."

"Um! Please!"

I am stuffed full of him, surrounded by his powerful body, hung immobile on his monstrous cock as he coaxes another savage climax from my body, this one higher, and tighter. My fingers clench over the bindings. My mouth hangs open on a pant as his thumb slides back and forth over my slippery clit that cannot bear the touch.

"Again," he growls, nipping at my throat. "Come again, *mate*." He is relentless, determined, and he takes me yet again, making me squeal with pleasure as I milk him of his seed. I twitch uncontrollably in the aftermath as he rocks against me. I try to relax, to accept, but there is so much of him, and I flutter around him, clenching over the arresting fullness.

Hands bracing my hips, he pulls.

"What? Oh!" I gasp as his softening knot slips from me, and still dripping seed, he crawls over me, splattering a trail of cum over my body until he pauses with his huge cock hanging over my lips. "Open," he says. He doesn't allow me to respond and takes my jaw in his beastly hand and squeezes until my lips pop open. And then he thrusts, growling low as he sinks all the way to the back of my throat before pulling out until the tip holds me open around this thick, hot cock. His taste explodes across my tongue, and his scent fills my lungs. "Clean me up," he growls. "Get your tongue all over me."

I lavish him with my tongue, suck and swallow around him as he fills me over again. I am greedy for him, wanting more of the stickiness that leaks and spills from the tip. Gazing up into the beastly eyes of this male who towers over me, I understand myself.

"You are mine," he rumbles. "My mate. Mine to protect, to cherish, to love." His bright eyes whirl. "Mine to breed."

Pulling from my mouth, still coming, he reaches to tug the binding holding my hands. As the binding drops, leaving me free, he moves down, spreading a fresh trail of seed, leading downward. When he finds a position between my spread thighs, he flips me over.

I gasp.

Arm wrapping under my waist, he pins my hips to his, his slick cock snagging my pussy entrance. His grip tightens, and he slams deep.

We both groan, and I fist the soft fur beside my face.

"That is the last taste you shall have, sweet Ivy, until you are good and bred."

Arm anchored around me, and beastly hand fisting my hair, he ruts me again.

Exhaustion pulls me under, but he rouses me time and time again, using my body in ways I find hard to reconcile, driving me toward delirium with pleasure. I groan softly as Balen takes me from

behind, rutting his hardness into me.

"Do you feel that, mate?" he asks, and I shiver from both his liberal use of that term and the sweet joy of being filled. His big hands upon my hips are the only things holding me up. "Feel how open you are for me, how easily this hot pussy accepts my wolven cock?"

I mumble nonsense. My body is no longer mine. It is his in every sense of the word.

"But we are not yet fully mated."

My face is pressed into the furs, my eyes closed on the sweet bliss of his gentle strokes into me, but I rouse myself and throw a look over my shoulder. His amber eyes find mine in the darkness of the cave.

"I need to claim you in all ways," he says ominously.

I fret, trying to pull away, not liking the devilish gleam in his eyes. He merely tightens his fingers on my hips and thrusts with greater vigor.

"Squeeze my knot, *mate*," he growls.

I don't want to. I'm sore inside, but it's like my pussy is his to command, I clench over his burgeoning knot.

It aches, but it also feels good, and his growl is one of masculine satisfaction. The knot slips free, and the slippery tip of his cock catches the little puckered entrance of my ass...and sinks a small way in.

"Umm! Goddess! What? No!" I struggle, not that it helps, for I feel him sink deeper.

"Good, mate," he says, "I will go slowly. Relax for me. You are tight here. My cock weeps, and it will ease the passage, at the thought that I might fill you in all the ways."

The stretch is alarming, but also darkly arousing. I clench despite his determination that I should relax. I want to force him out, but the rippling pleasure entices me. Inside my ass, I can feel the hot pulsing as he jets precum into me. He thrusts shallowly a few times, then stills. "Relax, Ivy. Bear down upon me and it will go easier for you. You may be certain I shall take you fully here anyway, but it will help some if you can be good and do this."

He has taken me over and over, filled my mouth and pussy with cum, wrested pleasure from me. But I am tired and nearing my limit as he sinks ever deeper into my untried ass. My cries turn guttural as he presses into me. This is not rutting, no, this is brutal penetration. I can feel how slippery I am, how his small pressure against me forces me to open and accept him. His arm curves around me, and thick, beastly fingers plunge into my pussy, the heel of his rough hand grinding against my clit.

My ass flutters, as the twisty, dark sensation of being filled front and back consumes all my thoughts. I gulp deep breaths that help me to relax into this, for I sense, true to his word, that Balen will not stop until he is done.

"So hot and tight," he grunts, slowly pumping his fingers. "I'm going to fill you now, my mate."

Inside he is still, his knot resting against my ass, but my fluttering around his thickness increases. I feel the climax coming for me as though from a great distance, rising up, gripping me in a blinding light and dark, sinful pleasure. He is a beast, a monster, a wolven, and he is claiming me in every way. Wild groans pour from my lips as my ass clenches and spasms around his thick length. He growls, and deep inside, I feel hot cum fill me as his teeth find my throat again, to mark and claim me.

CHAPTER THREE

When I rouse myself, it is to find light spilling into the open doorway of the cave. I am buried under soft furs, and the rumble of voices is close. I peer over the furs to find Balen talking to a human woman.

She is young and pretty, and instantly my rage rises.

I am fully charged with fury at the familiarity between them. I see how tiny she is, just like me, how she gazes up at him, the huge wolverine male, with a sweet, open expression and complete trust.

I growl, a strange, savage sound that is not part of me. Both heads swing my way as I try to rise, thrusting furs aside and only now understanding my weakened state.

Balen chuffs at the young woman, and she flees the room.

"Calm yourself, mate," he growls, wading into the nest of furs to gather me up.

"Unhand me, you beast!"

He grunts as my flailing fist connects with his snout.

"Ow!" He is hard all over and as strong as...well, a beast...I do not have hope. "How dare you chuff for someone else!"

He laughs, a deep rumbling sound that only provokes my temper further.

"Uff!" I am tipped onto my back, and his huge body crowds down over me, pinning my hands above my head in one giant, beastly fist.

His big tail swishes sharply from side to side. "Quiet down, Ivy," he says before his teeth find my throat and apply pressure.

I still, heart beating furiously within the cage of my ribs, even as my traitorous body responds to being mastered by this wolverine male.

He shifts, forcing one knee, then the other, between my thighs, spreading me open, making my poor pussy clench and weep. I strain against him, but it only places my pussy in perfect alignment with his hard cock. A cry escapes my lips as he slams the full length home.

His head lifts, and he grinds his pelvis against me. "There, mate. What is this nonsense about? Tulip is mated to my brother, Davin. She only came with some healing ointment as it might help with your soreness. She is assuredly no threat to your claim upon me, nor has she eyes for anyone but my brother."

The fight leaves me. A flush creeps over my cheeks and down over my breasts at my mistake, although I will be sure to witness her with his brother for myself before I am satisfied. His snout lowers, and his eyes take on a gleam I am learning to interpret as lust. "Your breeding scent is compelling," he rumbles before his big wet tongue catches the underside of my breast and laps all the way to the stiff peak.

"B-breeding?"

I try and fail to steady myself as he laps and nibbles upon my stiff nipples, shooting pleasure all the way down to my core. He rises to his haunches, my smaller body still impaled upon his thick cock, bowing my back so he might better tend to my breasts. My small wrists are now shackled to my lower back as he begins to rut.

"You are with child, Ivy." My small body is held secure within his hands as he slams me on and off his cock, setting my body and mind to riot. "You were mine from the moment I saw you and recognized my one true mate. I watched you, knowing I must wait. Then the war came for wolverine as

well as humans. I wanted you. Nearly took you so many times. But I smelled male upon you. *Human male.*" His rough rutting takes on an edge of brutality. "I told myself you had mated, that I could not have you, and that I must step away. But I never did. Never could. And then you came to *me*. Entered *my* world. Needed help only *I* could provide. So I took you anyway."

Tears spill down my cheeks. Sorrow that I ever sought comfort with another, for now I understand the pain Balen must have felt. But also joy that we are together, and I am with him, my rescuer who boldly captured me for himself.

Seeming to know my needs, he releases my wrists, allowing my fingers to sink into his soft fur and hold him to me as he ruts me, fills me, and shows me with his body that I am his. Inside, I am the best kind of sore, the kind made with the perfect combination of lust and love.

We come together, bodies falling into waves of rapture as he knots me and fills me once again.

After the knot softens, we cuddle together in the furs. He leaves me briefly to bring food and drink, for we are both hungry. He insists upon bathing me and applying some ointment to my tender pussy... which I admit does ease the soreness, although I blush the whole time. We nap together until he must rise to tend the dimming light and when he coaxes me from the bed.

"Come, Ivy. It is time for you to meet some of my pack."

"Who?" I ask, suddenly nervous, and more so when he confirms he is talking about his brother and Tulip. "I growled at her." I wring my hands, although I'm still a little churlish that she knows Balen better than me.

"And she will forgive you, for it is not in her nature to do anything else."

"Fine, she is perfect as well as pretty." I get a spank to my bottom and a swift rutting for my naughtiness, which doesn't exactly deter me from mischief again. It does, however, remind me that I am indeed his, and besides all of this, that I am with child, and there is so much wonder in this.

By the time I am coaxed from the bed for the second time, the lamp is almost out again. He provides me with a hide dress, which covers me, although it would be indecent by the standard of my former home. I'm nervous as we stand before the door. Beside him, I feel small and a little lost.

He pauses, placing his fingers under my chin and tipping it until our eyes meet. "You have nothing to fear," he says. "They will love you, as I do. Everyone knows about you because I told them long ago. All wolverines have a true mate. Although many do not meet them, some do, often when they are still children. Fate and circumstance may cause them to drift apart. Goddess willing, they come back together again. Some join with humans." He brushes my hair back from my cheek. "Some join other wolverines, and occasionally fairies. There are no limitations. Many, like you, are nervous when they first arrive. My brother met Tulip a few years ago. Now they have three beautiful children together, two human boys, and a wolverine girl, with another babe on the way. Although Tulip is a tiny human female, Davin keeps her plump with child."

Tail beating from side to side, he chuffs. It is filled with both affection and amusement. I love that sound. It was the only sound he gave me when I was younger, but now I have his voice and his words. I smile back, feeling even more foolish for my outbursts.

"There," he says, taking my small hand within his larger one. "She will not mind what happened. Tulip was feisty when she first arrived and took to hissing at any female who came near her mate."

I giggle, and his beastly lips tug up on one side in the wolverine equivalent of a smirk. "Let us go, then," I say. "I am ready."

I find a corridor beyond the sturdy wooden door, much like you might find in a grand house. We

head left toward light and sounds of merriment.

The corridor opens out into a tiered cavern. The central area holds a great pit where meat is roasting, with more intimate spaces opening into it. Here I find many wolverns, humans, and even a fairy woman with the prettiest silver wings. Children play among them, both wolverns and human. No one minds me, and this settles the nerves in my belly some.

We come out onto the far side, where a wolvern with dark fur sits upon furs with Tulip nestled upon his lap. "Hail, Balen!" The wolvern calls, raising his tankard to the air. "You finally roused!"

"Hail, Davin," Balen replies.

A few of those sitting nearby join in his brother's laughter. I squeeze tightly over Balen's hand for reassurance even as I bite my lip to hide my small smile. Balen glances down at me and chuffs before lifting me into his arms. Suddenly shy, I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my nose against his fur.

"My sweet little human," he says. "You are safe here. This is my family."

We take a seat among them. Here, I am introduced to everyone, including three shy children who peer at me with interest while hiding Davin, who is every bit as intimidating as Balen. Two blond-haired boys and a little wolvern girl, who, although the smallest, is the boldest by far.

"They are adorable," I say to Tulip, feeling all my foolish, misplaced anger fade away.

She smiles kindly. "They are excited to meet you, as we all are. Welcome to our pack."

"Thank you," I say, smiling and blushing. "And my apologies for earlier."

She waves her hand, chuckling. "Don't mind it. I was mean when I was newly mated." She glances lovingly at her mate. "It took some convincing before I would behave with a civil head toward the poor women of the pack."

The little wolvern girl is the first to come over. "Pretty," she announces while studying me.

Tulip laughs. "She is indeed pretty. This is Ivy, Balen's new mate."

"Will you have a baby?" the wolvern girl demands to know.

"Yes." I nod, resting my hand on my tummy.

"Good," she says. "Mummy! They are going to have a baby. I'm going to have my first cousin."

Food and drinks are brought over. We enjoy a pleasant conversation as the children overcome curiosity and go back to playing. All the while, a tingly awareness settles inside me because I am nestled on Balen's lap.

As I chat to Tulip, I reflect upon how my fortune has changed. I think about my lost family and brother, who still fights for the watch, how he will fear for me, and how I similarly fear for his safety.

"Do you think there might be a way to get a message to my brother?" I ask Balen. "He is a warrior with the watch in our village. The last time I saw him, I was fleeing the insurgents. I know he will be worried, just as I shall worry about him. He is the last of my family and a fine man in every way."

Balen brushes hair back from my face and laps his tongue across my lips. "There are ways," he agrees. "Trade has long passed between the worlds."

"Thank you," I say, a small weight lifted at this news.

The children grow sleepy, and Balen's brother announces it is time to put them to bed. We take our leave at the same time. Balen carrying the two sleepy lads and Tulip their little wolvern.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" Tulip asks. "If you are inclined, I could introduce you to the womenfolk within the pack."

"I should like that," I say. "I should like that very much."

"Good," she says. "And welcome again. We're so very happy Balen finally claimed you."

"Me too," I say, turning to my mate and experiencing all the wonder anew.

The lamp is out when we return. Balen carries me to the furs in darkness before setting the lamp low.

A strange shyness overcomes me as he settles down beside me and divests me of my hide dress. The air thickens between us as I wriggle so that I might face him. His amber eyes seem to whirl in the dim light, and my breath catches at the beauty of him. "May I touch you?" I ask.

"Of course, mate. I am yours, you may touch me in any way you choose."

I wriggle to a sitting position, pushing him gently over to his back. Goddess, he is so huge, and I, tiny before him. I pet his fur and explore his beautiful body with curiosity, all the while his bright eyes follow my every move. Between my thighs, a tingling starts while my breasts feel heavy. I press my lips to the end of his snout, giggling when he laps at my lips. But as my eyes lower, and I notice how his thick, pink cock pushes from the lightly furred sheath, my mood shifts.

Nibbling my lower lip, I glance back to find him watching me.

"Go ahead," he says, placing his hands behind his head. "Sate your curiosity, mate. Rest assured, I shall be exploring your lush body at my leisure for the rest of our lives."

My gaze lowers once more to my prize. The size is daunting but also arresting, and I close my fingers over it, gasping when it jerks within my hold and ejects a little stickiness from the tip.

He groans, and my eyes flash to him to find him watching me with hooded eyes. "Goddess give me strength against this gentle exploration."

I smirk and lower my mouth to it and kiss without further hesitation.

He moans again, empowering me to take my first lick. The taste hits my tongue and rolls down into my belly, setting a spark of fire within me as he emits a deep, rumble growl. Dampness gathers in my pussy as I suck him deep into my mouth, rewarded with a fresh gush of the spicy stickiness, holding him within my hands, pressing the furred sheath down until he is exposed all the way to the knot. I hum as I suck him. His fingers snag my hair, bringing a sharp sting that makes me hot and wet.

I take him deeper, reveling in the burgeoning awareness, of his power, of how I am pleasuring him, of his soft groans, and the gentle tugs upon my hair, of how I grow restless and needy...how I want him inside me...how I might cease to exist if I do not get relief.

My lips pop off, and I throw a look toward my mate, seeing an echo of my desire upon his face.

"Come, mate," he says, voice low and growly. "Mount me, ride me. Give me that sweet pussy that I crave so well. My cock does not care that you are already with child. I want nothing more than to fill your cunt to bursting with my seed, and knot you well so that it cannot possibly escape."

In a daze of lust, I climb over him, feeling impossibly vulnerable even like this. Hands upon my hips, he lifts me, helping me take his huge cock and place it where it needs to go most. I groan as the tip breaches me with a delectable stretch, then glare at him, wriggling with frustration when he does not let me lower.

"Please," I beg. "I need to feel you inside me."

"When I am ready," he says, holding me still and rutting up into me with slow, deliberate intent that does not give me nearly enough of his hard cock. "Cup your pretty tits, mate. Play with them. Make

those berry nipples hard."

Sobbing, with excitement, I don't hesitate to perform such a wanton act, cupping and squeezing my breasts, toying with the nipples as he continues to torment me with shallow, inadequate thrusts.

"Harder," he commands. "I want those pretty nipples plump and sore. I want to feel your slick pussy leaking all over my cock."

I do, gasping and squealing and halfway out of my mind with need.

"Yes!" His cock sinks deeper, the blooming knot nudging my entrance, setting everything tingling inside me.

"Pet your needy pussy, mate. Get your fingers all over that slippery little bud. Get yourself off, and I will give you my knot."

A flush creeps over my cheeks and down my chest as I lower one hand and shamelessly pet my clit as he ruts up into me from below. Mouth hanging open, I gaze down at him, my monster, my beast, driving my body toward culmination, my breath catching, and my naughty fingers making the wet sounds as they quicken.

"My filthy little mate," he rumbles approvingly, and I tip over into my climax. He lets me ride out the waves of pleasure until I become impossibly sensitive and collapse against him. He rolls, taking me under him, clamping an arm around my waist, and powering his huge cock into me deeply. "My perfect little human, my love, my mate. You will take all of me, now, and always, however and whenever I desire. You are my little breeder, and I shall make it my duty to keep you plump with my child."

Crowding over me, his thick knot saws in and out, driving nerves to life, driving me toward bliss once again. His teeth find the juncture of my throat and shoulder, nipping, holding, bringing a sweet ache that is echoed all the way to my core. I come, convulsing, squeezing over his knot and cock, feeling the glorious completion as he stills, flexing deep inside as a hot flood fills me.

Complete, perfect, heaven upon earth. I have found love and rapture with the monster in my woods.

EPILOGUE

"Michael," I call. "Come and mind your sister while I take the cookies from the oven."

Michael might ordinarily grumble, but the mention of cookies has influence over my wolven son. Even minding his sweet human sister, Abigail, who is not always sweet and prone to bouts of wailing loud enough to rouse the whole pack, is acceptable under the prospect of cookies. Not only Michael, for all the pack children have taken to mysteriously appearing when the cookies are nearly done. The wolven children with their superior sense of smell, I swear can be half a mile away, and sense when the baking is done.

When I return from the communal kitchen, tray in hand, it is not the children that render me a speechless stupor, nor their father who stands watching a few paces away, but the handsome human man in the Imperium uniform who crouches beside Michael, and Abigail.

His head lifts, and he smiles.

"Still baking Ma's cookies, I see," he says with a wink as he rises to his feet. "I could smell them all the way to the woods, and had to fight past a horde of squealing kids to make it this far."

My hand trembles, and my mate steps over to relieve me of the cookie tray.

A sob breaks from my lips as I run to him and throw my arms around his neck.

How good it is to feel him, my kin. How perfect to see him safe. My dear brother is a little older, as am I, but the time apart is of no consequence in this moment of reconciliation.

"I missed you," I say.

"And I you," he replies. "The war is finally over, and news of you came at the outpost where I was stationed. I thought you were gone." He pulls me to arm's length and brushes the tears from my cheeks.

"When I heard you were claimed by a wolven, I was worried, I admit. But look at you. Look at what wonder you have made."

He reaches down to ruffle the fur on the wolven lad, my son, who I named after him, before snagging a cookie.

"How are you? Where have you been? What will you do next?"

He grins and throws an arm around my waist. "Well, your mate has entreated me to stay for a while, and I happen to have a niece and nephew to get to know...so long as there are cookies involved."

"I swear I shall make cookies every day!"

He laughs, and the children all squeal their agreement.

"Will you tell us about the war?" little Michael asks. "And the human villages?"

The children crowd around him, curious about his uniform and sword and what it's like in the human lands.

As I relinquish my brother to the happy mob of children, I feel another arm. This one is fur-covered and snags my waist so a big hand can settle over my belly that has yet to show the growing babe.

"Thank you," I say, gazing up at my mate, knowing he had a hand in this.

"Your happiness is all the thanks I need," he says, snout lowering to nip the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder. "Our family is growing. Let us hope one of the wolven maidens who have suspiciously gathered can persuade him to stay."

THE END

Thanks for reading *Captured by the Wolven*. Want to read more?
Check out the rest of my *Coveted Prey* series and my other books!

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Prey: Imperium Protectors

Coveted Prey Book One

I am prey.

This is not pity talking, this is an acknowledgment of a fact.

I am small and weak; I am an omega. I am a prize that men war over.

For a year I have hidden in the distant corner of the Empire.

But I am running out of food, and I am running out of options.

That I must leave soon is not a decision for today, though, but a decision for tomorrow.

Only tomorrow's choices never come.

For tonight brings strangers who remind me that I am prey.

Prey is a fantasy reverse harem three stern alpha protectors, a wolf-shifter, and their sweet but stubborn mate!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Somewhere in the wilds of Queensland, at a desk with views over a semi-tropical landscape, I sit crafting stories... When I'm not being interrupted by my husband's off-key singing or my cat's wails due to his inadequately filled food bowl.

I write mostly sci-fi & fantasy and Omegaverse romance.

[Website](#)

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DESCRIPTION

A heartbroken witch forces herself to get back into dating only to get lost in the woods. It would all be cozy and sweet, but she has unfinished business coming for her.

Can she outrun what hunts her? Does she want to?

CONTENT WARNINGS

Chasing, sex with a beast, cozy stalking, knotting, rejected mate, and a tiny bit of non-consensual oral.

CHAPTER ONE

This was a stupid idea.

I jolt at the hoot of an owl and shake my head in dismay. My days of being afraid of the dark are long past and as a witch, I'm more than capable of handling anything I encounter in this forest, but it doesn't stop the dark shadows being cast by my cheerful light spell from being *spooky*.

The texture of the air seems to thicken and the glow of the ball of light I'd summoned as soon as I made it far enough from the nature reserve parking lot wavers. The light the spell provides me to navigate the floor of undergrowth and branches softens. The shadows around me take on a fuzzy look. Not the cute fuzzy, but the kind in a horror movie when the director doesn't want you to know what the ominous shape on screen is.

Is an actual fog rolling in? All the gods above and below, if the shadows start looking like creepy hands, I'm going back.

It had been the height of stupidity to trek into the woods without contacting my date, but when I'd parked earlier the last rays of the day had lit the sky and the forest appeared positively charming. The vibrations of the protection wards over the woods had been clear and I'd assumed it would be easy enough to trace those sensations to the male creature I'm meeting with tonight.

A walk through the trees had sounded so *nice*, such a departure from being cooped up in my apartment, wallowing in heartbreak. I'd momentarily forgotten that I'm not what anyone would call outdoorsy. This was supposed to be a simple little hike to get to what would hopefully be a sex-fest.

A walk would give me time to mentally prepare myself for the whole rigamarole of dating even if this date is under strange conditions.

That had all been before the sun had set. Now, a lonely walk through the woods is inspiring the hair on my arms to raise and every sound has me swearing.

And I may be lost. The vibrations had seemed so clear from the outside of the woods, but it's as if the strands of magic are coming from every direction now and I'm starting to question my senses.

I should have just stuck to the plan. Get to the nature reserve parking lot, call my date to tell him that I'd arrived, he would have come to meet me, walking me to his cabin, and if all went well, we'd spend days fucking through his heat.

A guy going through a *heat*. I've experienced my fair share of paranormal beings, but this is a first. Just what I need to get my mind off a certain wolf shifter.

To stop myself from making yet another useless phone call that he won't pick up.

When the matchmaker at the sexy bathhouse I used to frequent called me, it had seemed like deliverance. Rose's voice had broken me out of my grieving state and provided direction. I just need to keep moving... and move on.

I don't know much about my date but had been given more details than usual because of the situation. This is an emergency match because somewhere in these woods is a being of some water variety preparing to go into heat.

Rose had made sure to express that while she believed that my mystery date and I were compatible, we aren't a complete match.

Not like a fated mate. I shake the thought and the pang it delivers away.

I am moving forward. Action over inaction.

So, I'd pulled on some fancy underwear, put in some contacts, thrown on a dress, and prepared

myself to get fucked. I hadn't had the heart to put on one of my fancier dresses, my embroidery projects, though the dress with little skulls around the collar would have certainly matched my mood.

The one concession I'd made of my favorite art form for this date is my fabric headband.

I'd finished the moonlit forest design with a carefully stitched lone wolf howling right before my heart had been shattered. I wear it now as if it's a final goodbye.

This is me letting go.

At the very least, if I like this man, I'll be getting a good and thorough fucking. And maybe if things go well, we can talk about the future. It's not out of the realm of possibility that this guy could even convince me to carry his eggs. Stranger things have happened in this world.

Maybe this is exactly where I'm meant to be. The thought dispels some of the creepiness of my surroundings and leaves a pleasant tingle of truth down my spine.

And none of that will happen if I don't find that stupid cabin.

I pull out my phone again to check the service to no avail. I sigh. Stupid magic in the air is probably scrambling my reception. If I make it out of this alive, I'll have to spring for one of those magically enhanced phones.

I could make my way back to the parking lot...I think. The floor of the forest is dry and it's a struggle to make out the trail I've taken. My other option is to continue forward and hope to stumble over my date's place.

I rub my chest and the tingling from before seems to spread until goosebumps break out over my skin. I inhale the air that is suddenly still. The sounds that I'd cursed for startling me are gone. There are no more owl hoots and distant crickets. The forest has fallen silent.

I swallow. Fear has my heartbeat starting to thud in my ears. The sensation creeping up my spine clicks.

I'm being watched.

I force myself to start walking deeper into the woods, trying to plan. Spells come to mind only to be dismissed.

My craft is more useful in deliberate slow projects, not combat. I can, theoretically, throw a stun spell, but it would require absolute focus. What could possibly be watching me? Or is it a who?

My steps start to quicken without me meaning to. Think, think, think. If it's a cougar or a bear, I can probably throw a stun spell.

A twig snaps, the sound reaching me over the rushing of blood in my ears. I stop and look back, scanning the foliage. The glossy leaves and craggy bark around me reflect the light from my spell. I don't see anything. And worse, the woods fall silent again.

The information comes rapid-fire in my mind. Something is hunting me.

Something smart.

"H-hello?" I force out.

There isn't a response, but my raging senses know there's something there.

As my mind races, the light of my spell blinks a few times before sputtering out and the darkness envelops me.

I run.

A howl cuts through the night.

CHAPTER TWO

One Month Ago

I jump at the sound of the bell above the shop door, almost dropping my current embroidery project. The dreams from last night have left me a little on edge. Dreams of running through trees with an impossible mix of emotions: fear, adrenaline, and a tantalizing thrill that bordered on the sensual. I'd woken panting and confused.

I blow out a breath, trying to slow the race of my heart. I center myself before greeting the newcomer to my shop by finishing pulling the pale thread that will make up the moon of my thread nature scene. I love stitching nature because I can chaotically continue to add layers and details until my heart sighs with happiness.

Finally calm, I blink at the man in the doorway. The wards pulse at his presence telling me that this isn't some human walking in from the street to ooh and aah at my wares or to ask about casting a love spell. I've become rather jaded to humans pulling my magic shop up on google out of curiosity.

Maybe I should take my cousin up on her offer for a ward to dissuade humans from entering the shop proper, but the situation doesn't seem to occur enough to make the time worth it.

It just makes me a little cranky.

But the man in the doorway isn't human and won't be asking whether the crystals on display would make good table centerpieces. Instead, this individual is wearing a glamour. I raise a brow at the visitor and carefully set my embroidery hoop next to the register. The man's dark hair is disheveled, and his hands are deep in the pockets of his jacket as if trying to make himself seem smaller. His face is attractive enough, but the appearance he's wearing isn't real.

Even still, his presence...*pulls* at me. Something in me perks up. What has fate brought me this day?

"Hello," I say. "What can I do for you?"

The man pulls his gaze from a framed embroidered design declaring *Get Witchy!* to me and I suck in a breath. His eyes are so light of hazel they almost look gold and my body freezes for a moment as if I'm a rabbit halting in the presence of a hawk. No, that's not right.

A deer in the presence of a...wolf.

Ah.

The man's gaze drops, and he clears his throat. The spell over me that most certainly isn't magical in origin breaks.

The stranger looks around the shelves of spell books and lore encyclopedias.

"There are no humans here," I say. *We're alone.* I don't say that. It would be silly to go out of my way to tell a stranger that I'm all alone. Though...there's an odd feeling in the air that makes me think that I don't need to worry.

It's not that he feels *safe*. A shiver runs over my skin and my whole body is alight, alive.

Why do I trust him?

"I heard—" He cuts off before starting again. The man's voice is deep and smooth even if he seems to bleed discomfort. "I heard that you could help me."

Now it's not just my body responding to my mystery visitor. My professional interest rises, and I catalog the appearance of his glamour. His jeans are worn light in spots with what looks like sawdust brushed on one pant leg and the dark jacket is similar. The clothing he wears seems much too large for his frame.

I push my glasses up my nose. His glamour is a high-grade one that doesn't include the clothes he's

wearing so I'd guess this is a permanent glamour for him.

I let myself analyze just a small bit of the magic of the spell. The glamour is very well made from the tight stitches of power.

What is he hiding?

“That depends,” I say. “What are you looking for?”

“I-I’m pretty sure I’m cursed.”

CHAPTER THREE

I bite back my excitement long enough to flip the open to closed and lock the shop door. Curses do not come along every day. My greatest skill and interest is in breaking curses but the rarity of them means that a different source of income is necessary, hence the shop.

I do love my shop but the idea of detangling some nefarious magic has me practically skipping.

The man freezes at the door of my workroom as if he's stuck in glue and I mentally sigh at myself for forgetting.

"You need to remove the glamour before you can enter my domain," I say.

Distress flickers over the man's face and he looks like he's going to turn tail and run.

"I'd rather keep the glamour on," he finally responds.

I wince in sympathy. "This is a sensitive area. I can't have foreign magics working here."

"It's not pretty," he says. "I don't want to scare you."

I fold my arms. "I've seen a lot of ugly curses in my time."

Boils, rashes, speaking in tongues, hair loss, etc. The variety of curses never ceases to surprise me since the spells used for good are not nearly as diverse.

"The other curse breakers you've visited didn't require you to remove the glamour?" I ask.

"They were all able to work around it," he says before his eyes widen. "Not that there's anything wrong with you not being able to do that."

I wave a hand as if to brush away the comment. Everyone works in different ways. He looks around.

"Can you maybe turn around?" he asks. "Or turn off the lights?"

I take in the room, sympathetic to his discomfort. If I were to pull the curtains and click on the reading lamp it would give him a semblance of privacy and allow me to still work.

Turn off the lights and sit in the partial darkness with a stranger. It's a terrible idea but the feeling in the air is still there, tickling over my senses that it's important that this man is here. That he won't hurt me. But still...

"My name is Belinda," I say. "I'd rather not be complete strangers if I'm going to be alone in the dark with you."

And I just told him we're alone. Oh, well.

The man's smile is small. "I'm Jack."

With introductions handled I move to darken the room. While I pull the curtains the sensation of the atmosphere finally clicks. The Knowing. I can count on one hand how many times fate has communicated to me via the instinct that all witches have, and it's never whispered quite like this.

I click on the reading lamp and aim it away before I lift a chin to the light switch next to Jack. He smiles at me gratefully before clicking the switch off. I try not to look at the silhouette of Jack in the light from the doorway while he moves, probably removing whatever object his glamour is embedded in. The shadow on the floor grows in size. The sound of stretching fabric and popping stitches is quiet but echoes in my brain. I only have time to blink before Jack closes the door and plunges the room into partial darkness.

I gesture to the chair across from me. "Why don't you start from the beginning?"

The chair creaks. "I don't know exactly where to start. It's not a story or anything."

I smile at the dark and try to keep from focusing on any details. "Whichever way you want to tell

me. Why do you think you're cursed?"

"I'm stuck."

"Stuck?"

"Between forms, or something like it. I'm a wolf shifter and a year ago I was shifting back into a human, and something strange happened. It was like it stopped. I couldn't shift at all. I can't go back to being all wolf and my wolf form won't release me to be human."

I frown. That doesn't sound like a usual curse. No being forced to speak in riddles or being turned into a frog, just the halting of a natural process. I ponder that as Jack continues.

"The alpha of the pack I was associated with didn't know what to do with me, so I moved around, visiting different magic users until I ended up here."

"Your pack kicked you out?" I ask. That sounds very unlike the packs I'd come in contact with. Family is always first and foremost for every wolf-shifter I've met.

"They didn't kick me out. I didn't fit in with that pack before this happened and after..." There's a rustle of movement as if the creature in the shadows is shrugging.

"Were there specific people you didn't get along with?" I ask.

"No," Jack says slowly. He sighs. "I wasn't raised in a pack. My mom is human and didn't know my father wasn't until I started sprouting fur and a tail."

"Oh." That's all I can think to say. I wince. "And he didn't stick around?"

"Maybe he would have," Jack says. "The local pack found me during my first shift and said they'd had a loner passing through that was killed by poachers at about that time."

"That's...incredibly unfortunate. I'm so sorry."

Jack's laugh sounds humorless and rough with an underlying growl to it. "Bad luck seems to follow me."

A shape moves in the shadows, a hand is splayed out as if to say *what can you do?* The fingers are much longer than a human's and sharp claws catch the light before he pulls them back.

I clear my throat. "Well, let's see what we can do about that."

I ask more questions, trying to pinpoint what's been dismissed by past professionals. I delve into all the details. The curse happened on Jack's 25th birthday. Many of the common avenues of curses have already been explored by other professionals and one of them said the magic had a taste of fae to it.

I want to groan at that. Fae magics are not easily undone.

"May I touch you?" I ask. "I need to use my magic senses to see what we're dealing with."

There's a pause. Jack swallows. "Yeah. I guess you'd need to."

I wince in sympathy. "I can reach out my hands and you can direct them since I can't see as well as I'm sure you do in the dark."

I stand and walk into the dark part of the room, lifting my hands out.

There's another pause before rough hands take my slender fingers. I hold in my gasp at the contact.

A connection lights at the touch, sending sparks of sensation through my very soul.

Oh. *Oh.*

Soul mate. I want to laugh in incredulity and then cry tears of happiness. Never in a million years would I think that I'd even have a soul mate, let alone meet them. I want to run my hands through the wiry hair on his hands and explore every inch of my found soul match, but freeze instead, my heart in my throat.

Does Jack feel it? His grip tightens on my hands as if he does. Shifters believe in fated mates, but does he?

He releases my hands. The loss is sharp, leaving the world cold in the absence of his touch.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m pretty grotesque.”

I huff in frustration at his misinterpretation of my actions. *He doesn't know.* And this calling himself ugly and grotesque is offensive.

“You are not grotesque,” I say. “There are plenty of beings who don’t look human in our world.”

“That’s kind of you to say that, but it’s not like a witch like you would want to associate with things like—”

Annoyance has me speaking faster than my social skills can act. “If you must know, I prefer dating more on the more beastly side.”

The room drops into silence and my cheeks burn in a sudden blush. I didn't mean to blurt that out, however true it is. I *have* dated a full gamut of paranormal beings in the past. And I do prefer it.

“The more beastly side?” For the first time, Jack's voice doesn't sound like he's uncomfortable. Instead, it purrs in amusement.

I shrug, trying to play off the sudden embarrassment. “There's nothing quite like tentacles—”

A disgruntled sound comes from the beast before me, cutting me off. His hands grip mine again, this time lifting before placing them on either side of his face.

I trace my fingers over his cheeks. There's hair here too, it's coarse and thins in places but the action of petting it feels soothing under my hands. I stop myself from exploring his face but note that he seems to have a shorter snout than that of a wolf.

My curiosity about my fated mate burns, but I do my best to curtail it. I smooth my hands over his cheeks again without realizing it and try to keep from wondering just how wide Jack's shoulders are in this form.

There's the distinct thwacking sound of the wagging of a tail before it stops abruptly.

Behave, Belinda! I'm supposed to be analyzing this pesky curse on my soul mate, not feeling him up.

I take a deep breath and concentrate. The hum of magic reverberates in my mind's eye until it forms threads. Everyone that alters magic with any complexity perceives it in different ways. For me, it's always been threads. I don't know which came first, my love of embroidery or the way magic appears in the forms of tangled knots.

Now it's just about untangling the knots.

Jack's own magic from his wolf weaves a silver thread through his presence, his soul a warm glow behind that; magic, but untouchable for one with my skills. The distant threads of my ward on the shop surround us and I frown.

Where is the curse? I step closer, trying to concentrate. My front brushes the cloth of Jack's jacket and he jumps.

“Sorry, I just need to—there we go!” My front almost presses to his, but I push the sensations away, scanning the threads again.

I'm so close that his minty breath warms my cheek.

I focus hard on the silver thread of Jack's wolf, and it shimmers. *There!* Another thread reveals itself. A dark green thread winds and knots around the silver thread, so tight it's barely visible to my senses. I frown for a different reason this time. The green thread glints in the way fae spells do and

there is no portion of silver thread that isn't wrapped with it.

I drag my hands down Jack's thick neck, over the sleeker fur there, and dig my fingers into the flesh of his shoulders under his jacket. My magic tugs at the green thread and Jack gasps. The texture of the curse is slippery, but it gives up its secrets after a few more nudges.

Jack isn't going to like these secrets.

I prod a little more and Jack's hands that have somehow made their way to my hips tighten. I open my eyes to the world of regular darkness.

Heat bathes my front and it's clear that I'm violating Jack's personal space, but with the heat comes a twist of arousal in my low belly. My fingers thread decadently through the fur of his neck. The form before me vibrates with the soft rumble of a growl and I come to my senses. The air between us is thick with tension and a small part of my mind is satisfied that I'm not the only one feeling this.

But we have things to discuss. I take a step back and the large hands gripping my hips release me.

"Um, I found it," I say.

"The curse?" Jack asks. I've adjusted to the dark just enough to see two pointed shapes perk up. *Ears.*

I nod. "Uh, yep."

I return to my chair, trying to loosen the interest that tightens my body.

"Do you know why I'm cursed?" The earnestness in his voice breaks my heart but I keep my face professional.

The first item on the list: deal with the curse. It's Jack's biggest concern and nothing should detract from it. After that's handled, I'll tell Jack that we are soul mates.

"It's fae in origin, but it's hereditary," I say.

"Hereditary?"

"It's as if your line has been cursed. There's no telling how far back it starts or the reasoning behind it." I shrug. "Pre-Council era fae curses can be because of anything from looking at them wrong to doing something actually offensive."

Much of the conflict among the paranormal beings settled with the creation of the Council that rules over us. The system isn't perfect, but the decrease in the number of curses being placed is good for the community, even if it means less work for curse breakers like me.

"Can you break it?" Jack asks.

I wince. "Maybe. I have some methods I want to try before we resort to a riskier one—"

"Yes, anything you have to do, do it." He sounds hopeful.

I try to temper his expectations. "Jack, it might not work."

"I believe in you."

The soulful sound of that declaration has me breathless before dread rises.

"I vow to you that I'll try my hardest."

"Um, how much will your services cost?" he asks.

I freeze. My soul rebels at the idea of accepting money from my mate. "I'm not sure. We can talk about payment plans if you want, or if you have any skills to exchange. I promise you won't be subjecting yourself to eternal servitude." I ramble and my cheeks heat. "And, hey, if I don't succeed, there's no charge."

His laugh is rich. "We can talk about it later. Eternal servitude wouldn't be too great of a cost to pay."

I snort, but the idea is a sad one. I can't control how clients think of their own afflictions, but later, as his mate, we can talk about whatever insecurities he may have.

Jack is mine to keep, cursed or not.

CHAPTER FOUR

We make plans and I hit the books. Focus is my superpower and I throw everything I have into trying to break Jack's curse. I assemble books about wolf shifter transformations and fae spells. I even throw a book on lycanthropes in the pile even though, according to the text, that subspecies of fae hasn't been sighted in the last hundred years. I'm skeptical about that tidbit because rarer species are notoriously secretive, but all information is helpful information.

Every interaction we have, I'm tempted to blurt out that we're soul mates, but that confession will derail everything, and Jack wants this curse broken so badly.

Maybe I won't even have to tell him.

Maybe he'll recognize that we're fated mates.

Every few days I muster up the research and materials to try for a solution less extreme than my last resort and I call my soul mate. Our conversations are awkward at first, we're strangers meeting under less than ideal circumstances, but slowly that changes.

"I'm starting to think that these calls are just because you miss me." He teases over the phone a week into our process.

"Oh, I definitely miss you, but I do have another idea." My words sound much less like teasing than his did.

There's a pause over the phone and I want to fill it but don't trust myself to stay on the topic of curses.

My soul cries out for Jack. Does he feel the same? Is this one-sided?

I don't think it is.

That curse-breaking idea fails, and a week later we try something new. Jack downs a vial of some herbal mixture. We're in a sitting area in the back of the shop. The shelves are tall enough to block us from any passerby. We only go into my workroom when it can't be helped. I still haven't properly seen Jack's true form and I can tell he doesn't want me to.

Jack's human face scrunches in disgust. "I don't want to insult you, but that is foul."

I laugh. "Next time, I'll put sugar in it."

He perks up. "Really?"

"No," I say.

He laughs and a sound has me leaning forward. Jack's face smooths and his eyes glint wolfishly as if taking in our distance before his face softens.

"Thank you, Bel."

I blink, still not used to the intimate way he shortens my name. "I haven't done anything yet. We'll give the remedy a minute to work, and I'll check the magic then."

His mouth twists. "I imagine I'd be able to feel if it's working."

I shrug with a wince. "Most likely."

Jack shakes the bitterness away from his shoulders. "Thank you for trying so hard."

I frown. I'd try this hard with anyone who would come to me for help, but I have an invested interest in making Jack happy.

He continues. "These last couple weeks I've been poked and prodded, tasted more horrible potions than I ever want to in my life, and had you whispering incantations in my ear for so long I think I'm starting to dream about them."

“I care, Jack.” I bite my tongue to keep from spilling everything. “And all of those things didn't work.”

“Yes, but you're trying and for the first time in a long time, I'm hopeful. It feels like I have a future again. Almost like I can make plans.” Jack says. He places his hand on mine which rests on my knee, his fingers intertwining with mine. The touch soothes the worries that plague me of what will happen if I fail to break his curse. “Like I could maybe ask a certain witch out on a date if this all goes well.”

My heart flutters in my chest. “If I'm not that certain witch, I may turn you into something fouler than that potion.”

Jack's laugh is hearty now and I can't stop the burn of my blush any more than I could keep that statement to myself.

“Consider me warned, but I don't think that's something we'll have to worry about.” The warm hungry look in his eyes takes my breath away.

The attempt is a failure and though Jack tries to hide his disappointment, it hangs in the air.

“There are so many options left,” I say.

Jack smiles sadly. “I trust you”

He goes to leave but stops as if he's arguing with himself before turning back.

“I know that I'm currently something out of nightmares, but can I take you out for coffee?” The question is rough as if he's rusty at dating.

My happiness glosses over his self-denigration.

“I'd love that!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Coffee dates and gifted lunches every time I attempt to break his curse is how I get to know my soul mate. I'm trying my best not to get distracted from my task, but he's so *distracting*. The way he ducks his head and explains his hobby of playing video games online to relax and talk to new people without showing his face. He talks about working in construction with other beings that require glamour in their everyday life.

"But you have a glamour," I say, gesturing to his human form. "You could work anywhere you want, right?"

Jack grimaces. "This type of glamour isn't cheap. If I wear it less often, I can stretch it further."

"Oh," I say, thinking of all the time we've spent chatting together.

"And I actually enjoy working there. My coworkers feel like... family." Jack's cheeks pinken.

"They've become your pack," I say.

"Exactly." The skin around his eyes crinkles. "It's funny. In a lot of ways, my life is more promising now than before the curse."

The look in his gold eyes is direct and heavy. "How so?"

"Well, I found one thing I didn't know I was looking for."

I bite my lip at his words. Jack changes the subject before I get too excited.

Too distracted.

There are moments where our hands touch or gazes meet that leave me blushing. I make a clumsy advance, or two, or three, asking him to come up to my apartment over the shop, but he resists. I may be waiting to address the fact that we're mates until after the curse is broken, but that doesn't mean I don't want him.

"I can't, Bel," he says.

"Why?"

"I don't want what we have to be tainted by my curse. You deserve the best of me, not to be pawed at because my wolf wants to devour you. It's already a struggle to remain civilized around you."

My body sways toward him. "I wouldn't mind being—"

"Not yet, Belinda. Please."

I nod. We have the rest of our lives together. I just need to break Jack's curse. But the days pass and I don't know how realistic breaking the curse is anymore. The cloud of disappointment and sadness over Jack seems to grow with every failure.

"You've been trying your hardest for weeks, Bel. I don't want to waste your time if this is a fool's errand," he says.

"Waste my time? You are not a waste of time. You're my—" I shake my head. "You're mine."

The words are accurate without revealing more than Jack's ready to accept. The expression on his human-appearing face is full of vulnerability.

"You've tried so many methods. Why can't we just try the one you mentioned when we first met?" he asks.

"It's risky—"

"But it's the most promising, isn't it?"

I don't want to lie to him. "Yes."

"I think it's time to try. I don't want to disrupt your life if—" He cuts himself off with a look of

helplessness. *Disrupt my life?*

“Jack, if I can't lift the curse, I'll still want to be—”

“How is it risky?” His question is rushed as if he's not ready to hear such a declaration.

He's not ready to know we're soul mates.

I straighten my spine. “The method would be me manipulating the magic. I'd carefully untangle the curse strand by strand and hopefully pull it free from you.”

Hope flares in his face at that.

“But, if I can't get a grip on the thread, if I lose it...the curse could become permanent.” I shrug hollowly.

“Belinda, I—” Jack breaks himself off and swallows. The price of this option is too high.

“But if that's what happens, if I don't break your curse, I want you to know—” I start.

I'm cut off by his kiss. The crash of his lips against mine levels and revitalizes me. I moan into his mouth eagerly when his tongue slips into mine and firecrackers of sensation rain down my spine.

I'm panting when we part.

“It's worth the risk,” Jack says, his eyes full of weight and purpose as if to say *you're worth the risk*.

I pull in oxygen, but when I respond my voice is still breathless. “It's your choice to make.”

Which is how I find myself stumbling in the dark of my workroom trying to make a warding circle. My eyes have mostly adjusted to the low light, but I avert them out of respect for Jack's privacy even as curiosity eats away my conviction.

I wish he trusted that his form isn't going to disgust me.

But trust comes with time.

I stand straight, the ward I've made surrounding the chair that holds Jack's large form in the dark. I take a few deep breaths and run my fingers over the witchy skulls I'd embroidered on the cuffs of my sleeves to center myself.

Finally, the tension in my shoulders seeps from me and my heart is calm.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“Please,” Jack says. “And then we can go out on a real date.”

His upbeat words don't hide the naked hunger in his voice. The flavor of it has my heart cracking and I screw my eyes shut. Warmth envelops my cheek and rough, padded calluses press, cradling my face as if to reassure me. I cup my palm around Jack's hand, bathing in this rare contact.

“Hey, Bel, please don't stress. I know that this may not work. If it doesn't—” I hear him swallow “—If I'm stuck like this, I know you did everything you possibly could.”

The sharp ends of his claws prick my skin as he pulls away.

I sniff and nod. “Well, either way, you owe me dinner after this.”

“Bel—”

I make a cutting gesture with my hand, and he stops. “You owe me this real date you've been teasing me about.”

His chuckle is full of disbelief.

I shake my head and raise my hands in front of me. “Let's get this show on the road.”

Jack's hands take mine and bring my palms to his face. Nerves threaten to push up my heart rate and I let my fingers run over the shapes of his face to center myself for this task.

“Okay,” I say and close my eyes. “Don't interrupt me.”

“Yes, my mate,” he says before stiffening.

I shut down the flip of my stomach at those words and push forward.

The world in my mind comes alight with magic and tangles of threads. I'm quicker to find the threads of the curse now that I know what I'm looking for. Sure enough, the silvery woven thread of Jack's wolf is bright and pulses under my touch as if his beast wants to loop around me to keep me close.

My mouth curves at that and I focus harder to see the dark green thread choking around the silver. The curse.

Slowly, as if I have tweezers, I use my own magic to tug on the green thread. As with before, the fae magic is resistant but eventually yields. I keep my breathing measured, cautious as I start to pull the magic from the silver of Jack.

The wolf shifter under my hands shivers at the sensation, but I block it out and focus on the first knot of the curse. The knot is around several silver threads, and I wind the magic I've already collected around my finger so it doesn't slip away before snipping it.

“The crystal, please.” My voice is hoarse. My energy is already starting to wane. There's movement and a rock slides against my palm. I fist my hand around the crystal, feeding the threads into the storage device before easing my grip. “Take it back.”

Jack does as I say, and I focus on the knot in front of me, untangling it slowly until the silver threads spring apart and I pinch the end of the green thread with all my might, continuing to spool the magic as I follow the thread until I meet another knot. I repeat the process a few times.

Sweat runs down my spine and I gasp in exertion. Every so often Jack makes a pained sound that he cuts off.

The pull of the magic I'm working with is costing me an uncommon amount of energy, as if what I'm doing is against the grain, wrong.

Everything blurs before me.

“No, no, no,” I whisper, waiting for the vision of the threads to come back into focus. It looks like there's one more knot. One more knot and I can give Jack exactly what he wants. The thread bites deeper into my magic, resisting.

Exhaustion pulls me down. I've truly overextended myself, but if I stop now, I'll never find these specific threads again. With the way I've been yanking at it, it could very well snap and be absorbed into Jack's threads, becoming a part of his very essence.

I sway on my feet and Jack's hands grip me, keeping me upright. My vision of the threads comes into focus, and I quickly untangle the last knot.

I'm about to take a relieved breath when the thread I grip is yanked away out of my hand and I lose track of it.

“No!” I scramble for it, but it's gone. The world of threads blurs and blinks out.

I've failed. I fall and the world goes dark.

I come to in the arms of my mate. The room is still dark, but I know the sensation of his presence and the scent of fresh-cut cedar.

“Jack—” I croak.

“Shh drink.”

A glass is pressed to my lips and the cold water soothes my throat.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I try and think back to how I got here. Trying to break the curse...and failing.

No, I'm not okay. The aches in my body and soul tell me that I used every bit of energy up trying to lift the curse and it wasn't enough.

"H-how long was I out?" I rasp.

"A few minutes. You were working on it for hours."

Tears well in my eyes and I try to keep from sobbing.

Jack makes a sound similar to a canine whine. "Bel, beautiful Bel, please don't cry."

I shake my head and press my face into the fur at Jack's neck.

"Don't think about it," Jack says.

But I can't stop thinking about it.

My sobs are quiet, but Jack holds me tightly. He comforts me while the truth of what happened ricochets through me.

I've failed my mate. Jack will have to live with how I've disappointed him for the rest of his life.

The pain of that is like a vise around my heart. I push myself out of his arms, trying to breathe through it. We need to talk. I've disappointed him but I need to figure out how to persist past that. But first—

"It didn't work," I say.

The shadowy form of my mate shrugs as if it doesn't matter. "You tried."

"I was able to get a lot of it. You might not need to worry about passing the curse on to your children," I mumble.

"Belinda, that kind of life isn't in the cards for me."

"What kind of life?" I ask. Prickles of unease run over my skin.

The silence grows between us and icy panic stirs.

"I know this isn't the answer you were hoping for." I sniff, scrubbing the tears from my face.

The shadows move and I get the sense that he's shaking his head. I can practically taste his sadness in the air. I place my hand over the furred knuckles and claws on the armrest and he pulls away. I'm carefully placed on the chair. Already I miss being held by him.

"We tried, Bel," he says. "You tried so hard, but...it's not in the cards for us."

"No," I say. The word is choked, but so harsh it hurts my throat.

But Jack is pulling away from me. "Bel—I'm so fucking sorry."

"Don't go!" I try to grab hold of our future together but it's like trying to catch smoke. "I-I thought we were going to go to dinner?"

Stupid, stupid, stupid. He's not going to want to go out. Not when he's dealing with the permanency of his curse.

"Bel... that's not possible."

I want to throw myself at him, dig my fingers into his fur and make him stay, but I can hardly stand.

"Your glamour—" I try instead.

"Is just a glamour!" Jack shouts. Frustration and grief are clear in his voice and his next words are softer. "I'm still a monster under it."

"But I want your monster," I whisper.

Jack steps toward me with a growl. The primal energy coming off him makes me want to run and throw myself at him in equal measure.

"My wolf wants to ravish you, lock you away from the world." His voice is low, and my attention

is rapt. “I’m barely in control as it is.”

“Then let him! We’re mates!” I blurt out what we both know by now.

“We can’t be mates when I’m *this*.”

The large, clawed hand gestures to his body.

“*Please!*” I say. “We can figure something out. I like you the way you are.”

“I can’t.”

His words hit with the finality of a guillotine and the panic buzzing in my mind silences into despair.

The door clicks when he leaves. My fated mate is gone.

He left me.

My heart bleeds pain as if I’ve been grievously wounded.

I sit in the dark and cry.

CHAPTER SIX

Present

Fear and something I can't quite name flows through my blood as I run. I am afraid, but this isn't a cougar or a bear. My panicking body recognizes what I'm running from even if my mind hasn't yet. The pounding of my feet on the ground and the rush of air against my skin is a primal dance I've never participated in.

Another howl sounds behind me, closer.

I ignore how the underbrush tears at my tights and the pebbles bruise my feet, my sandals long gone. Something large crashes behind me.

I scream when I trip, but instead of slamming into the ground, I'm caught.

Clawed hands seize me and familiarity rises past my panic. There's no time to make sense of anything because we're still moving at a run. The world blurs as I'm flung upward, over a broad shoulder that jostles me with every loping stride. My fingers dig into a fur-covered back before my brain catches up to the fact that I've been snatched. I beat my fists against the back under me.

"Let me go!" My shout is only met by a growl. The light scent of cut cedar has misplaced heat kindling instead of panic.

"Jack?" I ask. It defies logic, but my heart knows I'm right.

We slow when the trees break into a small clearing. I'm tossed to the ground and stumble back, falling on my ass. I barely catch sight of Jack's "monstrous" form before he flips me onto all fours, one of those giant clawed hands pressing between my shoulder blades, grinding my chest into the dirt.

I struggle but it's no use. I'm pinned.

"Jack!" I shout. Annoyance and frustration rush to the surface. And anger.

"Mate." The word is a growl so deep it's hard to make it out. Is this his wolf speaking? The primal part of his animal that can't be separated from a shifter.

"Yes! I know! But you can't just chase me down like a fucking deer!"

Another growl. "You're in another male's territory. His pheromones are everywhere."

"I know!" I growl back. "He's my date!"

The silence that falls over us has teeth that tear and rip into me no matter the fact that I've done nothing wrong. Jack's snarl breaks the stillness and has the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

"No! You're my mate."

I grit my teeth at him using the m-word again. My anger morphs into fury.

"Why should you care?" I spit. "You're the one that left me!"

There's a pause, and the long-fingered hand on my back tenses and relaxes, as if Jack's struggling.

"It was the right thing to do." The words are less growly this time.

"No!" I try to lift my chest from the dirt. "I called you over and over again, trying to convince you to be with me. Well, guess what, I'm not trying anymore. I need to move on, and this date is the first of many."

"I can't. I can't let you go." The growl is back as if the civilized part of him has lost this round. Jack presses his hips against my raised ass. "Mine."

I moan. The adrenaline from the run and being pinned and helpless has me heating for all the wrong reasons.

"Wrong," I whisper. "I *was* yours and you threw me away."

A thick tongue licks the back of my neck and ear. An unholy heat cascades over me and Jack rocks

his large form against my hips again. There are only a few layers of fabric separating my wet pussy from the hard bulge pressing against it.

The devious part of me wants to push back against Jack's body, to tempt the beast behind me into giving me what we've been skirting around since the first moment we met.

A hungry growl rumbles over my nerves as if Jack can read my mind.

"Mine. I can taste your desire," he says, his words almost slurring. "I need to satisfy my mate."

My anger still crackles under my skin along with my arousal. "Oh, that's rich, now you want to satisfy me. You had your chance, Jack."

My skirt is pushed up despite my words and the sound of ripping fills the air. I cry out and I can't tell if it's from annoyance or desperation. My tights and panties pull against my skin as they rip until the cold forest air hits my ass and the wetness between my legs.

Fuck. I liked that too much.

Jack grips the back of my neck to keep me in place as his body moves behind me until his hot breath hits my pussy. We moan in unison when he licks me. His tongue is strong, long, and pointed in a very non-canine way. The next stroke has me pushing my hips back at him.

It suddenly doesn't matter that Jack broke my heart, that he rejected me, that I failed to break his curse. All that matters now is the stroke of that hot tongue and the possessive grip on the back of my neck. Each erotic action clicks into place how we should have been as if they sweep away every wrong he's ever done to me.

As if I've already forgiven him.

My mate.

"Don't stop," I gasp, my body capitulating to him.

Jack's moan is rough and the sounds that fall from my lips would make me blush if I were in my right mind. The slide of his tongue is a deliverance from the terrible time since we'd last parted. The constant tears, the catatonic grief. I'd finally emotionally dealt with my personal shame of not being able to break Jack's curse. It had taken time to come to terms with the fact that I'd done the best I could.

The pain of Jack's rejection... I'd thought a hard fuck may get me on the right path. This isn't the hard fuck I'd had in mind but I'm starving for his touch.

"Please, Jack," I say. I don't know exactly what I'm begging for yet, but I know I need it.

Jack's hand grips harder on the back of my neck when I twist against his mouth.

"Please, please, please." My begs are whispers of my soul's most fervent wish.

"You're on a date." He groans the words and there is still a thread of anger there.

"But I want you. I always want you," I say.

The pleased sound he makes tells me how much he likes that. He slides his tongue inside me as a reward and I shout.

"So good—" I break off on a cry as his tongue curls inside me. My need is heavy, and I shamelessly shove my pussy back onto his mouth with as much abandon as I can manage while being pinned.

Each stroke hits me exactly where I need it but it's not enough.

"Jack, I need you."

His tongue slides from me and I make a sound of loss.

"Bel, you're so perfect," he says. "Mine."

Mine. Yes, that's what I want.

“Claim me,” I say.

Jack's growl is deeper at my request, and he pulls away from me, motions jarring and primal. I whimper at the loss, but it's cut off at the slick-on-slick sound behind me. I turn my head, but Jack blocks the motion, stopping me from assuaging my curiosity. I cease trying to see him at the wet smack of a thick weight on my back.

I moan as what feels like a giant blunt tongue slides over my ass. A tongue, but too thick, too hard. The member drags lower, smearing the wetness it's covered in over my skin. The blunt head of him pokes against me as if Jack can't help the rocking of his hips even if he's not where he needs to be yet.

“Oh gods,” I say when the head of his cock presses against my pussy. I'm so soft and wet there that the flesh yields to him, sliding him to my entrance.

Jack freezes as the movement of his hips presses the shape of him barely inside me. The back of my neck is released, and his hands grip my hips instead as if to stop me from moving, or to stop himself from thrusting forward.

“Belinda, don't move.” Jack's voice sounds tortured as if he's only now realizing where this was leading.

“No! I need you,” I beg.

He growls. “You don't need to fuck a beast.”

I smack the ground in frustration. “Yes, I do! I need you inside me. I need you to fuck me.”

“I'm a monst—”

“If you don't fuck me, I'll find someone who will!” I threaten as if I can just walk away from this without leaving my heart bleeding on the ground.

The snarl rent from him is loud and completely inhuman. I'm about to snarl back when my mate thrusts forward.

I shout but can barely hear it over the rush of blood in my ears. Everything clears from my mind except the animal sensation of being taken by my mate.

Oh, holy gods! The stretch!

Jack's howl is triumphant.

His body moves again into mine. I groan as the heavy cock forges its way deeper inside me.

“Oh, fuuuuck,” I trail off when he slides out before thrusting in again.

This time my ass hits the base of him. The hair of his body and thighs tickles my skin. He freezes with his body fully encased in the wrap of mine.

“Oh Jack,” I gasp. The cock inside of me throbs as I stretch around it, willing my body to accept every inch of him.

“God, Bel. You're taking it all, aren't you?” Jack asks.

Over my gasping breaths, my body screams in its need for release. I writhe for relief and find none.

“I need you to move, Jack.”

His claws dig into my hips.

“I need you to fuck me,” I beg.

Those are the right words to say because my monster ruts into me then.

“Mine,” he snarls. “Mine to fill, mine to breed. My mate.”

My body heats and slicks to meet my mate. To take from him what he'll give me.

It doesn't matter that I'm wearing a charm to ward against pregnancy, he can try to breed me into the ground if he wants.

The rutting motion is fast and jarring but my body rises to meet it. Pleasure heightens with each drag and thrust inside me. The waves of my arousal push me higher and higher.

Jack gives me his full cock again, up to the base of him, and holds me there with a groan. The first splash of liquid heat triggers my climax and I struggle, trying to thrust my body back against Jack but he keeps me motionless. The thickening of his cock only throws me further into ecstasy.

"Oh! What—" I start.

"My knot," he gasps.

"Your what?!" I twist to look at my mate but the motion tugs at the swollen *knot* inside me and we both hiss.

I moan as the knot gets even bigger. It triggers something in me. *Claim, claim, claim*, my instincts whisper. I tilt my head to the side, my forehead grinding into the dirt as I attempt to bare my neck completely.

Our bodies throb in time to each other. My heartbeat starts to slow, and I wait for the action that will officially make us mates by shifter standards.

I wait for my mating bite.

The silence of the forest ebbs away and I can hear crickets in the distance, and still, I wait.

The trance of instinct wrapped around my mind cracks.

"Jack?" I ask.

He huffs.

"Claim me," I say.

And still, he doesn't move. A minute passes, and then another. The heat of our connected bodies cools. The knot connecting us softens and he slides from me.

I want to curl in on myself and cradle the empty place in me, but I don't move. If Jack is going to reject me again, I'm going to make him say it.

"Jack," I say.

"No."

I squeeze my eyes shut to keep my tears from falling.

"I can't," he says.

It doesn't matter that the words are soft, they wound me. I yielded to him. I gave up my body for him and it still isn't enough.

"Can't or won't?" My voice is hoarse, and I don't wait for the answer. I press up to kneeling and pull my dress down, ignoring the river of seed running down my thigh.

The warmth of Jack's furred body moves away from me, and I wipe a tear away with a sniff.

"Bel, it's not that I don't want you."

"I think that's exactly what it is."

"Look at me!" The volume and pain of his voice startle me. "I'm a monster!"

I finally let myself look at him. A being similar to the werewolves found in Hollywood movies stands on hind legs with arms spread, waiting for my inspection. He's big, tall with strong shoulders and long limbs. His body is covered with fur that thins in places and thickens into a tail behind him. His face isn't much of a surprise. The truncated snout with large fangs and yellow eyes.

I recognize him. Even stuck in the form he's in, there's a familiarity to the slope of his brow, the

shape of his eyes. Or maybe it's just that my heart sings in his presence. My soul recognizes my other half.

Jack casts his gaze away from me. "And I'd be even worse if I trapped you as my mate for the rest of your life."

I want to grab him by the shoulders and shake him. "I've already told you that I like that about you! I like your wolf being so close to the surface! Your wolf has never hurt me!"

"I just chased you down and fucked you in the dirt!" Anger seeps into Jack's voice.

"I wanted that. I trust your wolf. He knows what he wants," I say.

Jack scoffs and I continue. "He wouldn't abandon his mate once he found her. It's the man I don't trust!"

Jack's ears flatten as if in pain and I cut my gaze away. I need to focus on other things. I need to keep moving.

"Where the fuck is my phone?" *Fuck*. There's some sort of paranormal being going into heat and I'm not going to be able to show up with my thighs streaked with the seed of my almost-not-quite-ex. "I need to call someone about my date."

A growl rumbles from the fierce beast in front of me and my anger snaps.

"Oh, fuck you! You don't even want me."

"I want you too much, but I can't—"

My sneer cuts him off. I abandon my search for my phone and march up to him, poking his chest. "You. Don't. Want. Me. Enough. You won't listen to me and what I want. You're cursed. You're never going to look or be like how you were before and I am so sorry, but I want to be with you just the way you are—"

"You should find someone better," he says adamantly.

I hold in my hiss of anger. "You are my mate. My soul mate. I know this. There isn't anyone I want more."

"Not even the guy whose pheromones are hanging in the woods?"

"That was—" I blink away the rush of emotion and continue with a whisper. "That was a mistake."

There is no way to fuck away the ache for this beast. Not even the promise of heat sex with an interestingly shaped cock can remedy the wound of this rejection. I know myself well enough to admit defeat.

Jack stands motionless, his hands twitching as if he wants to grab ahold of me.

I shake my head walking a couple steps away before gazing up to the starry sky as if for guidance. I'm angry and hurt, but it's all underlined with devastation.

I turn toward a frozen Jack and spread my arms. "What do I have to do to prove that I want you the way you are?"

My voice cracks and that's what spurs me on, makes me want to lash out. I need Jack. It's only fair that he should feel the same way about me.

"Is it that you want me to beg?" I ask. "Am I going to need to spread my legs in front of you, show you how wet I am?"

The tension in the air thickens with my words and Jack's eyes glint in the moonlight. The look in his eyes makes me want to do wicked things. Mean things. Things that taunt my soul mate into forgetting the weight of his negative self-talk.

I pull the zipper of the dress down and let the garment fall first from my shoulders and then from

my hips before stepping out of it. The beast before me freezes. I'm completely bared to him. I'd forgone a bra and he'd already torn free my panties. I kick my dress flat before lowering myself to it and laying back.

The positioning under the moon makes me look like a sacrifice.

I prop myself up as a thought occurs to me. "Why are you even here Jack? Did you follow me?"

He shakes his head. "I came here for a run and caught your scent on the wind. I needed to make sure you were safe, but when I saw you—when I scented the male—"

Chance. Fate.

I gaze up at the moon. My wolf requires more convincing that we're meant to be. I slide my hands up over my breasts and Jack's glowing yellow eyes follow the movement.

"Belinda..." Jack trails off. He swallows as I display everything he's letting go of.

"I want you, Jack. There's nothing about your form that disgusts me."

"You can't want this," he says.

I hum. "I'm getting pretty annoyed that you don't believe me. Does the fact that I want you this way disgust you? Is that what the issue is?"

"Of course not! I want to be the best version of myself for you."

I swallow at that. "And you don't think I want to be the best version of myself for you? We both have our perceived flaws, but at this moment, I'm telling you that I want you how you are."

I slide a hand down and spread my legs, placing my feet flat on the ground, and bending my knees. I stroke up my folds and the sound of my wetness has a hungry growl rumbling from Jack.

The motion is almost meditative with a spike of pleasure, and I let myself fall into it.

"Under this moon, I offer you my body, my soul, for claiming. Will you reject me?" I swallow. The moment is heavy with the weight of tradition and significance. If he denies my offering, there will be no future for us. We'll leave this forest and go our separate ways.

Jack's body tenses as if the truth in my head also echoes in his.

I circle my clit and my breath shortens. Jack takes a step forward and stops.

"I want you, Jack. I want to see you when you take me." *When you claim me.* The thought is too tender to voice.

That same wet-on-wet sound comes as the head of a fleshy cock unsheathes from the fur of his hips.

I watch it breathlessly, the circling of my finger on myself making my toes curl as inch by inch extends from him.

"This is what you wanted?" he asks, his voice rough with frustration.

I moan as precum beads on the pink head of his cock.

Jack tilts his head, considering me.

"You do want this." His words are soft, almost marveling. His long fingers curl around the thick flesh of his cock, careful of his claws. When he strokes up, my legs draw in and a needy sound falls from my lips.

Jack narrows his eyes at me. "You want everything I have to offer you. You're spreading your legs for me, teasing me with how good you smell. It's heady, smelling the mix of my spend leaking from you."

I tremble and Jack continues. "You want me to fuck you into the dirt again."

"Yes," I whisper.

My cheeks burn and I pinch my nipple. I'm impossibly wet between my legs, a combination of us. I press two fingers in and inhale at the easy slide. My hips tilt up for his gaze.

"I want you to claim me," I say.

Jack breaks the scene for a moment to shake his head slowly in awed disbelief before resuming whatever sacrificial tradition we've started.

"Will you accept my body into yours?"

I exhale and swallow. My lower body feels heavy with want and I pull my legs wider.

The cock in Jack's hand lengthens and my body clenches on emptiness. He approaches me, falling to his knees before my splayed thighs, tugging his considerable thickness even longer.

How did that fit inside me before? I don't let myself ruminate on that thought. I need to take my mate. I need to prove myself. I need to be claimed.

"Please," I beg.

Jack runs the head of his already shiny cock up my folds. The hot wet touch has me whimpering.

"*My mate*," he says as if in prayer before he continues in filth. "All open and offering yourself up to me. You're so pretty like this, all pink and wet in the moonlight."

"Jack, I need you," I gasp.

"You need me to fuck you?"

"I need you to stay with me," I say. My emotions are so close to the surface like this. I'm all aroused vulnerability and heartfelt earnestness. "I need you to wake up next to me in the morning and to get takeout together at night. My heart needs you."

Jack bows his head. "I need you too."

"Then make me your mate."

Jack rolls his hips forward and the head of his cock presses in. The stretch of my body is slow this time. He freezes at my hiss of pain.

"No, keep going. You're just so big. I can take you," I run my words together, afraid that he'll pull away from me, but he doesn't.

Jack strokes my cheek. "Shh, I'm not going anywhere. I know you can take your mate."

I moan at that and his cock slides deeper before stopping to pull back some and returning to go farther. Jack works his body into mine. His flesh, my flesh, our souls made to never be separated.

The small thrusts bring him more into my body. Our foreheads meet on one last deep slide that brings my body flush with his. The stretch of cradling him encompasses all my senses. The moment is perfection. All the pain and grief from before are eased by the raw feeling of completeness.

I moan and tense around the impossible amount of Jack inside me.

His voice rumbles from him. "I could die happy from the sweet squeeze of your cunt."

"Jack..." I beg, squirming from the unforgiving fullness.

He moans and our eyes meet. "Mine."

"Yours." I lift my chin. "If you claim me."

Jack narrows his eyes and slowly pulls from me. The drag of his thickness against my inner walls has me moaning, I break off on a cry when he snaps his hips forward, plowing into my body without mercy. He repeats the drag and conquering thrust, moving in an unmerciful rhythm. I lose more and more of my sanity with each move, my fingers clawing into his shoulders as he fucks me.

Jack starts grinding the pad of his thumb against my clit and I try to writhe away from the friction, but he doesn't let me escape. Instead, he pushes me higher until my release breaks over me. I cry out,

my body clasp down on his unforgiving girth as pleasure surges in my blood.

“Bel, my Belinda,” Jack snarls in satisfaction before truly beginning to fuck me.

He ruts into me, and I take his body eagerly. Each cleaving thrust prolongs my release until Jack thrusts all the way in and halts on a growl.

My moan is guttural as what must be his knot swells against my insides, locking us together. The heat of his cum spills inside me, increasing the tantalizing pressure. The assurance that I've been filled to the brim with his seed.

“My mate,” he growls and grips my hair, pulling my head to the side to bare my neck.

The bite is quick, the pain is a flash before the magic of our bond soothes it and throws me into a euphoric release. The world shatters and my grip of reality slips, but I'm exactly where I need to be.

In my mate's arms.

I return to my senses lying belly down on something warm that rises in a steady rhythm. I blink and Jack's chest comes into focus. The grayish tint to his skin and sparse fur is a comfort. He hasn't hidden under a glamour.

The soreness in my neck from the mating bond has awe-filled happiness swelling in me. I slide a hand to the wound and sure enough the bite mark is raised, rapidly healing to be a scar for me to display.

“I'm glad you've accepted that I love you this way,” I say.

The chest under me huffs in a laugh. “How could I possibly doubt you after what happened? You argued your point very convincingly.”

I tuck my face into his chest to hide my blush. I'm as sexually liberated as the next witch, but I don't think I've ever been as bold as I was when taunting my mate.

Jack pinches my chin and lifts my gaze to his. I'm not completely used to seeing his true face, but each time I do my comfort grows. The snout, fangs, and pointed ears are Jack. My Jack.

“I'm so sorry I hurt you,” he says, the misery clear in his voice. “I'm sorry that I was so stuck in my own head and stubborn about what I thought you should have that I didn't listen to what you wanted. What I did is inexcusable.”

I prop myself up on my elbows, my naked breasts rubbing against his skin, but Jack doesn't leer. His gaze is solemn on mine.

“We all have our hang-ups. Thank you for apologizing.” I stroke a finger up the bridge of his nose up to his tufted ears. My mind categorizes the shape of them as strange before I go on teasingly. “I may need some more groveling before I accept your apology though.”

“Is that so?” Jack says with a mock growl, his hands squeezing my ass, pressing my spread legs against his middle. “I hope to use my tongue to be very convincing.”

I moan at the contact and my cheeks burn at the thought of that strong tongue.

Wait. The workings of my brain are slow with how my body hums with tired satisfaction. *If Jack's shift was halted, wouldn't his features be either canine or human?* My eyes sharpen on him with a more clinical gaze, and I sit up, straddling my mate.

I've never analyzed Jack's true appearance in our previous meetings because of his reluctance, his shame. I let myself take in the details now, adding each one to a list of observations. Instead of being flat like a canine, his tongue is long and pointed. The small things add up: the shape of his ears are thicker points, The broadness of his shoulders exceeds that of his human appearance, and do wolf shifters have knots?

After my inspection, which makes Jack raise an eyebrow in question, I have my conclusions.

Well, fuck me. I snort.

“I know why I couldn't break the curse,” I say.

Jack frowns down at me. “You don't need to worry—”

I cut him off. “It's because it's not a curse.”

The way the green thread was so tightly wound with the silver comes to mind. I bet if I looked again, it would be right back as to how it was before I touched it. I spread my palms on his furred chest and close my eyes to check. The world lights up in magic threads in my mind's eye and I laugh. Just as I thought, the green thread is back winding around the silver, as if they are making up a whole thread.

“How did you feel when I tried to untangle the curse?” I ask to make sure.

“Um, I'm not sure. I was feeling a lot of things.” The gray of the skin of his cheekbones darkens in embarrassment. *Ah, because he'd just left me.* “But...drained, I guess. And a little nauseous.”

I shake my head at both of our follies. If he'd only let me see him before...

“The logistics are unusual...” I trail off, thinking of the chances.

“Belinda.” Jack shakes my hips a little to get my attention. “What are you saying?”

“Oh, sorry! You must have fae in you. Lycanthrope, I'd be willing to bet.”

“What?”

“Hybrids don't usually happen,” I say. “For most beings anyway.”

I make a gesture in the air, not wanting to go into the way magics and genetics interact.

“There have been guesses that lycanthropes from the fae plane were the first wolf shifters, but that doesn't really make sense because the appearance isn't the same and the differences in anatomy,” I say.

Jack shakes his head. “But I'm a wolf shifter. I had my first shift when I was twelve.”

“That's the thing,” I start. “Shifters shift with puberty. I bet if I do some research, we'll find that lycanthrope strength grows with age. You could have been dormant...until you weren't.”

The longer Jack blinks at me the surer I become.

Finally, he clears his throat. “What you're saying is that you think this is how I'm supposed to be?”

And this is how he'll stay.

I bite my lip before nodding. “Yeah. You can always see about being trained in fae magic instead of using a manufactured glamour by someone else.”

I wait for Jack's reaction, knowing this isn't the answer he's looking for. This isn't anything in the realm of what he expected.

“Not a curse after all,” Jack whispers, dropping his gaze to where he's gripping my hip.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Just processing. I've had so many hang-ups about being turned into a corrupted version of myself and you're telling me that I'm actually something else entirely.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “I'm saying that you're just a different kind of monster and that there's nothing wrong with you.”

The grip on my hips tightens as his eyes meet mine. “And you're a fan of monsters, aren't you?”

I rock my hips and grind against the cording of his stomach. “I seem to have a soft spot for them.”

Jack smiles and the number of sharp teeth revealed startles me, but his mirth is tangible. “In your heart?”

My nose scrunches. “Well yes, but also somewhere lower.”

He growls and sits up, his arms wrapping around me. “You're insatiable.”

My teasing falls away. “Just with you. Do you think you'll be okay?”

“Yeah. I'm going to be better than okay.” His nose brushes against mine. “Even if my entire world feels different, I have my mate by my side.”

My joy overflows and my smile widens. Fears that he'd run away from this, from me, again are dismissed by those words. Whatever there is to face, we'll face it together.

“Yes, you do,” I say.

“And I'm glad that my mate is a fan of monsters.”

That he can say *monster* without flinching when he's used it negatively for so long makes my heart sing, but that song stutters at the direct look in his gaze. The tension between us builds and my pussy throbs at the sudden change no matter the ache of soreness.

“I think my mate lusts for something else too,” he muses.

“What?” I ask, my eyes big.

“To be chased.”

A thrill shoots up my spine. “I can't be running in the woods barefoot and naked.”

Jack's smile is part terrifying and part thrilling.

“Oh, you won't make it that far,” he says.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears and the muscles of my legs tense. Jack's face comes near mine and the brush of his breath against my face adds to my adrenaline.

“Run,” he commands.

I'm helpless to obey.

I shoot to my feet and dash away as a bone-chilling howl rises behind me.

THE END

What about the date Belinda was heading to?
A monster is in need of some relief.

Find out in *Found by the Lake Monster*!
(Which was nearly named *Bred by the Lake Monster*, but... better safe than sorry with some stores)

<https://www.lillianlark.com/found-by-the-lake-monster>

Curious about this sexy bathhouse with a matchmaker?
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FOXING
A SHORT STORY
ASHLEY BENNETT

BLURB

After a grueling training session in his quest to become a samurai, Kazuo must brave the snowy woods to feed his family. A skilled, diligent hunter, he is as sure of his success as he is his training: his sharp aim and arrows stand ready to bring home a bounty. Deep in the woods, however, he soon finds that even the steadiest hand is useless when it's at the mercy of another. When a beautiful, bold vision of legend sets her sights on him, the mighty hunter finds himself playing prey instead, all while falling into an exquisite, nine-tailed trap.

CONTENT WARNINGS

Dubious consent, tail play, breath play, primal play/ chasing, femdom, knife/weapon violence, violence, gore.

ACT ONE: THE HUNTER

“Yah!” Hideshi screamed as the wood of his practice sword connected with mine. The sharp crack broke the silence of the training ring and sent shock waves reverberating down my arm. I held my sword in a block, planting my feet firmly in the ice-covered sand. My chest heaved with the exertion, sending little clouds of smoke billowing out into the early morning air.

“Just give up already, Kazuo,” he gritted out through his own labored breaths. “Go back to the rice paddy where you belong.”

“Never!” I shouted before quickly ducking out of the block. Hideshi flew forward as I spun around, following through with my swing until he was lying flat on the ground with my sword pressed against his neck.

His nostrils flared and his eyes burned with anger as he stared up at me. He knew the fight was over.

“Well done, Kazuo,” Sensei said calmly as he gripped my arm, slowly lowering my wooden weapon from where it kissed the skin of Hideshi’s throat.

Hideshi rose to his feet and spat at the ground near my boots before stalking off. I couldn’t hide the smirk that turned up the corner of my lips. Generally, I tried to maintain my modesty, but there was something about Hideshi that brought out the worst in me.

“Any word?” I asked as I placed my weapon back in the wooden rack next to the ring.

Sensei winced at my question, the wrinkles in his face etching deeper with the movement. “I haven’t heard anything yet, but soon, I’m sure. I know several lords have expressed interest. Do not give up hope, Kazuo.”

I clenched my jaw but bowed my head in thanks. While many doubted me, this man had seen my potential and taken me under his wing. He had helped to hone my skills as a warrior to the best of his abilities. Now, I just needed to catch the interest of a lord. The opportunity to serve as a samurai would be my ticket out of the village and on to a life of adventure.

We walked in silence past the other sparring pairs and headed toward the Shinto shrine. Passing underneath the bright vermilion torii, our footfalls on the stone steps echoed through the empty open air sanctuary. The carved Inari foxes stood watch over the shrine, their blood red scarves flapping in the bitter winter wind.

“I heard that you’ll be heading out on a hunt soon. I thought we should pray for prosperity before you go.” Sensei raised his hand and pulled the rope, the droning sound of the copper bell filling the surrounding air. He tossed a coin in the offering box and we respectfully bowed our heads twice, as per tradition. I clapped my stiff hands together, muttered a prayer under my breath, and bowed my head again.

When we raised our heads, Sensei gripped my arm, keeping his eyes focused on the dark woods off in the distance while he spoke. “Kazuo. Be cautious in your travels. There are strange forces at work in the woods.”

“Yes, Sensei.” I wanted to argue with him. Tell him that the old woods were home to animals and nothing more, but it would have been disrespectful, and of no use—the old man was set in his ways.

“I will see you when you return. Hopefully, I will have good news for you by then.” He gave me a small reassuring smile and left me standing alone in the shrine.

I puffed out a breath and ran my palm over the worn stone Inari, contemplating Sensei’s words.

Winter had come in swift and hard, giving our village little time to prepare the usual food stores. As our rations thinned, my aging parents looked to me for survival. But perhaps this hunt would serve two purposes. It would provide for my family and also gain me the attention of one of the lords. The latter was doubtful, but one could hope.

I packed my worn bow and what little hunting gear I had before bidding farewell to my elderly parents. As their only child, I knew they would be worried about me on this expedition, but it had to be done.

“Here, Kazuo. Take this for your travels.” My mother extended a parcel of fried tofu, aburaage, and a ceramic decanter of sake out to me. I opened my mouth to protest, but after seeing the troubled expression on her face, I took the package from her hands and bowed my head in thanks.

My father limped over from his spot by the fire and tugged my fur robes tighter to my neck. “Make sure you stay warm out there. I can feel the snow coming in my bones. Are you sure you need to leave today, Kazuo?”

I smiled at my father, taking in his thinning gray hair and the marred skin of his face. My mother always said my features mirror his. Strong cheekbones, deep-set brown eyes. I was told that at his prime he had my same lean, muscular physique. I was considerably taller though—even more so since his back was bent with age and hard work—but then again, I was the tallest in our village.

In his youth, my father was a fierce samurai, but after being badly injured in battle, he was resigned to a life in the rice paddy. His body was beginning to slow, and I was unsure how many seasons I would have left with him. My greatest wish was that he would get to see me become a samurai before his passing.

“Yes, Father. I need to replenish our stores before the weather worsens and the game disappears.”

He nodded his head in agreement, but I knew the idea of sending me out by myself pained him.

As we made our way out of the house, I took a moment to survey the village. Whorls of smoke billowed out from the thatched roofs of the neighboring homes and the snowy landscape was mostly silent save for a few merchants peddling their wares in the square.

A familiar sound broke the silence of the sleepy village. The sharp call of a falcon pierced the air before the bird came to land on a nearby fence post. It focused its unblinking black eyes on me, tilting its head in question.

“Ah, it seems your friend has come to see you off! Perhaps he will bring you good fortune on your hunt,” my mother said cheerfully. She always delighted in seeing my falcon friend. I was determined to tame him as a hunting partner, but the process was taking longer than expected. For now, he was content with being a freeloader, coming and going from our farm as he pleased.

“Pah. Kazuo doesn’t need luck. He’s deadly with a bow and arrow, just like his father,” my father said with a wave of his hand and a crooked smile.

“He probably came to see what scraps I have to offer him today. Curious little bird.” I whistled to the falcon, who swiveled its head from side to side, blinking its beady eyes rapidly before shooting off into the air. I followed its movements, watching it soar through the haze of the gray winter sky.

“I have to go. I’m losing daylight,” I told my parents with a resigned sigh. I dipped my head in a respectful bow and started off for the woods.

“Kazuo! We’ll miss you! Stay safe!” my mother shouted from the steps as I set off down the snow-covered path. I waved my arm but didn’t turn around. I may not have been able to provide for them as a samurai—yet—but this, this I could do.

ACT TWO: THE FOX

The snow crunched under my feet as I followed the trail markers my father and I had etched into the trees over the spring. Without them, there would be no way for me to navigate through the dense beech forest. Even with the trees naked of their leaves, the forest was a winding, disorienting maze.

I sat on a fallen log and removed my gloves, cupping my hands over my mouth and warming them with my breath. Remembering the sake my mother had given me, I pulled it from my pack and took a long drink. I grimaced as the liquor hit my stomach, sending a wave of warmth throughout my frozen body. Soon, I would head in the direction of the stream and fill my waterskin before settling in somewhere for the night.

For what felt like hours, I trekked through the snow, following the trail markers to the river. Near the bank, a large, white hare nibbled at the sparse clumps of grass that poked through the snow. My hands shook from the cold as I pulled an arrow from the quiver on my back. I notched it on my bow, pulling the bowstring taut before steadying my shot. The hare continued eating, its black nose twitching back and forth, unaware of the danger its life was in.

Inhaling a breath of cool air that stung my lungs, I released the arrow. I held my breath as it whizzed through the air, coming up short and missing the hare by a few *shaku*. The skittish creature darted off through the snow to live another day.

“Shit”, I murmured under my breath, the word coming out in a puff of white smoke. The temperature was dropping and I could smell the sharp tang of incoming snow in the air. Through the thick cover of trees and the gray sky, I could hardly make out the position of the sun to gauge the time of day. I knew from the darkness seeping into the forest that it would soon be dusk and I’d need to find shelter for the night. I trudged through the snow to retrieve my arrow, fighting hard to bury my frustration. I had to catch something. I could not return home to my parents empty-handed.

With the arrow tucked safely into its quiver and my bow slung over my back, I dropped to my knees on the snowy embankment of the river. Despite the cold, the water remained flowing and clear, reflecting my tired, windburnt face back at me.

My pitch black hair whipped wildly around my head in the wind, and I rolled the top portion into a tight knot at the crown of my head to tame it. Delicate crystals of ice stuck to the coarse black hairs of my beard. I had been told I was attractive, handsome even, but I was always too busy with farming and training to pursue any of the village women. Over the last few years, my mother had been persistent, but I saw no point in taking a wife. At least not until I became a samurai.

I smiled at my reflection before dipping the waterskin down into the stream, the ripples ruining the image. I hissed as the frigid water touched my fingers, but held the bag steady until it was full. As I secured the bag to my satchel and rose to my feet, I heard a branch snap in the distance.

My eyes darted in the direction of the noise and I readied my bow.

Another snap.

Silently, I moved through the trees, seeking the origin of the noise in the otherwise quiet woods.

That’s when I saw it.

A creature covered in bright white fur was bent defensively over a kill. I could hear the tissue of its prey ripping and tearing as it swallowed the meat in greedy gulps. This creature was big—larger

than a fox or even the largest dogs I had seen back in the village. I attempted to back away, but when I moved, the beast's ears twitched. Dread twisted in my stomach as the animal raised its head and glared at me with vibrant, golden eyes. Blood coated its muzzle, and I could see glimpses of large white fangs as it curled its lips in distaste at my presence.

My eyes widened in shock as the fur along the beast's spine bristled and a fan of nine tails bloomed behind its back. I had to fight the urge to rub at my eyes. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

A kitsune. In these very woods.

The creature stared back at me, eyes narrowed and unblinking, its body rigid other than the nine tails behind it flitting wildly with irritation. A low growl erupted from its throat as it stalked closer. The gap between us closed with each step of its giant paws.

I was out of options.

I had to run.

On nimble feet, I dashed between the trees, tucking my bow tightly against my side. What little start I had on the creature was lost quickly, its frantic yips making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. My eyes searched the woods frantically, scanning for something, anything, to provide me shelter from the beast.

Faster and faster, it gave chase. My breath burned in my chest, and my muscles ached from overexertion as the woods opened to a wide clearing. My back prickled a warning not to waste time looking back, I could sense the creature hot on my heels, closing the gap between us.

With a high-pitched screech, the creature pounced, careening into my back and sending us rolling for several feet before pinning me underneath it. I could feel the beast's warm breath along the column of my throat. I waited for the pain to come. I was going to die here in these woods, alone.

But the pain never came.

I felt a warm, wet tongue glide along my neck, and I could smell the metallic tang of its kill heavy in the air.

Slowly, I opened one eye and then the other to get a better look at the unusual animal.

A set of golden eyes stared down its bloodied muzzle, its ears standing straight up as it examined me. There was something off about the creature, something other than the size. It had some humanoid features. As it hovered over me, I became aware of the fact that underneath its thick coat of hair, it had breasts, the peaks of which touched me with each heave of its chest.

I tried to roll away, but the creature yipped loudly in my face. Its tails shot out from behind its back and coiled tightly around my wrists and ankles, ensuring that I couldn't escape.

"Let me go, you beast. Please!" I shouted while wriggling wildly beneath the creature, the ice-crusted snow crunching underneath me with each thrash of my body.

A sound that was oddly similar to a laugh slipped out of its maw, and I stilled my movements, looking up into the animal's face.

"You—you can understand me. Can't you?" I muttered in disbelief.

I watched in awe as the features of the creature's face softened. Its fur slowly morphed into delicate porcelain skin until straddling over top of me was a beautiful, nude woman. A pair of white ears protruded from her head and long, straight, black hair hung down over her breasts. Her petite nose was just slightly upturned, and her full lips were stained crimson with blood.

But her eyes.

They were the same fiery gold as the creature's.

I had heard the legends of kitsune deceiving mortal men, but I had always thought they were just that—legends.

“W-what are you going to do to me?” I stuttered, my throat tight with worry.

She stared down at me, biting her lip with a sharp, pointed fang. One of her unoccupied tails slid between us and gently caressed my face, the thick fur tickling my cheek.

Slowly, she began to rock her hips into mine with steady movements.

I sucked in a breath and fought to process the feelings that were bubbling up inside of me. She wasn't human—even if she could take on the features of a mortal woman. I shouldn't have wanted her. I shouldn't have wanted this. But I did. I longed for it. Longed for her.

My need consumed me.

I wasn't bothered by the bitter chill of the snow beneath me or the frigid wind. The warmth of her body—from the fluffy tendrils of her tails wrapped around my limbs to her human form settled over my skin—radiated deep into my bones, warming me from the inside out.

It felt so good, but I knew it was wrong. She was a kitsune, a trickster. And I was a mortal man. I had deprived myself for too long and I could no longer fight it. My cock began to swell.

When she felt my erection press against her, she giggled wildly, throwing her head back with mirth and flashing me a glimpse of her dazzling white fangs. She was entertained by my reaction and the tails restraining my wrists tightened as she set to work undoing my pants.

I started to object, but the thought was wiped from my mind the moment her dainty fingers took hold of my cock. With two hands, she expertly worked the shaft, squeezing and twisting until the tip was glistening. She rubbed two fingers in tiny circles through my precum before popping them into her mouth.

Another delighted giggle slipped past those blood-red lips as the taste of my arousal hit her tongue. Faster, she worked my cock, her grip tight and confident.

“Fuck,” I groaned as my body thrust into her fists of its own accord, “you're good at this.”

She smiled at me slyly before bringing her face down closer to mine. Those full lips kissed along my jawline until she found my mouth. I opened for her without protest, her tongue sliding against my own, the iron tang of blood filling my mouth. Why was I allowing this to happen? It had to be some sort of seductive magic, the likes of which I wasn't able to resist.

I didn't have long to dwell on it. I could feel my balls tightening, my orgasm creeping closer with each pass of her hands along my cock. As if she could sense it, she slowed her motions, tugging my bottom lip with her fang before breaking our kiss.

From underneath her, I watched as she slid her hands down her body, her fingers stopping to pinch the rose-colored buds of her nipples before continuing lower. Right above her pussy was a delicate patch of white hair that matched her fur when she was in her fox form. I had never seen anything like it. I wondered what it would be like to stroke my fingers through it after making her come all over my hand. What it would taste like to suck each bit of her release off of my fingertips. I was painfully aware of the fact that I was still restrained. She was the one in control here.

Her golden eyes seemed to burn brighter as her hands continued their descent down her body, passing over her toned stomach, then lower still, stopping at the glistening folds of her pussy.

She held my eyes as her fingers danced back and forth over her cunt, and my cock twitched when she finally plunged them inside. Her breathy moans filled the quiet clearing as she worked herself

over with her fingers until her arousal was dripping down her thighs and onto my cock.

As if she could somehow read my earlier thoughts, she removed her slick fingers and held them out to me in offering.

“Please,” I whined, hating the desperation in my voice but I needed to taste her.

She drew her hand away.

“No, no! Please! I have to taste you.” I tried my best to fight against the restraints, lurching my head and neck forward, but I was no match for the strength of her tails.

Again, she laughed—that airy twinkling sound—and playfully tickled her tail against my jaw. Slowly, she leaned forward and slipped her slick fingers into my mouth.

Her flavor erupted on my tongue. She tasted sweet—like cherry wine and mochi. Sweeter than anything I had experienced before. I moaned as she thrust her fingers in and out of my mouth, my tongue lapping up every bit of her that I could.

When she was pleased with the job that I had done on her fingers, she pulled her hand away, and another whine crept out of my throat. This woman—this kitsune—would be my undoing.

Focusing her golden eyes on me, she palmed my cock, working the soft skin of her hand over my sensitive head. She shimmied up my body until her glistening entrance was pressed against my shaft. Rising onto her knees, she notched my cock at the entrance of her pussy.

“F-fuck,” I stuttered. “Please. Fuck me, please.”

I gasped, a desperate, strangled noise as she worked herself down onto my shaft.

Her pussy gripped onto me like a vise, as if there was no room to spare. As if I were made for her.

When she was seated to the hilt, she threw her head back on a moan, riding me with tiny snaps of her hips.

“Shit, yes,” was all I could say. I could feel the hold of her tails loosening ever so slightly, allowing my hips to buck upward and drive myself deeper inside of her.

Her hands clenched the furs in the middle of my chest tightly as she rode me. Our grunts and moans were the only noise in the otherwise silent forest.

I desperately wished I could touch her clit. Slide my calloused fingers over the sensitive bud and bring her to orgasm at the same time as I finished.

Her tails darted into view. I remembered the way she used them to caress my face earlier and a wicked idea came to mind.

“Touch yourself. With your tails,” I panted out between thrusts.

She stopped her movements and focused her gleaming golden eyes on mine. Her mouth contorted into a devious smile and one sharp, white fang dimpled her plump lower lip.

Slowly, twin tails made their way down her body, the soft tendrils of fur leaving gooseflesh in their wake. When they reached her apex, the tips grazed against her clit with a feather-light touch. Over and over, they moved. I was in awe that the same tails that were holding me prisoner could be used to give her pleasure. She was absolute perfection.

Faster and faster, she speared herself on the thick length of my cock. Her cheeks were flushed and little beads of sweat collected along her hairline when another tail drifted between us. It coiled around my neck and gripped just the slightest, cutting off my air supply just enough to heighten the sensation of my pleasure.

I stared into those golden eyes, reddened lips, and heavy breasts with each snap of my hips and

each gasp for breath. My balls tightened and I felt a tingling sensation at the base of my spine.

I was going to come.

I tried to speak the words, but all that came out was a strangled wheeze, the chokehold of her tail muting my speech. As if on cue, she threw her head back in ecstasy, a cry slipping past those blood-red lips. A keening, guttural bark no human mouth could make. It was something animal, something foreign.

The sound pushed me over the edge, calling to some primal part of my being, and my cock shot spurt after spurt of warm cum inside of her. As her pussy tightened around my length, so did her tails, driving my orgasm to new heights. The restraint, the tails, the cries. It was like nothing I had ever experienced.

When the last waves of orgasm had slipped from our bodies, she leaned down and brought her lips to mine once again. It was a chaste kiss, a peck on the lips instead of the frantic tangling of our tongues that we had engaged in earlier. This was sweeter, more intimate. Her tails slid free of my limbs and I clenched and unclenched my fists and rolled my ankles, fighting off the pins and needles sensation that had overtaken my limbs. She moved off of my softening cock and a ribbon of my cum momentarily connected us before it broke away.

Her golden eyes stared down at me as I tucked myself back into my pants, my chest still heaving and my hands unsteady. I rose to my feet and scrubbed a hand over the back of my neck. I wasn't sure what to say. How was it that she could so easily rattle my composure?

"Uh, thank you. For that." She stared at me as I spoke, her expression blank.

Why wasn't she saying anything? Maybe she wasn't capable of speech. She was certainly capable of communicating in other ways, though.

Another snap of a twig from across the clearing drew my attention and I turned around to focus on the source of the sound. When I turned back to face her, she was gone.

I was standing alone in the clearing, the blue light of dusk closing in on me.

"Kitsune!" I screamed. "Kitsune! Come back!"

I rubbed at my eyes and felt a pang of emptiness in my heart. Was she real? Or had I imagined the entire encounter. I dropped to my knees in the cold snow and hung my head.

What was I doing? I was out here to hunt. To provide for my family—not fall prey to beautiful creatures that may or may not exist.

I rose on shaky legs and trekked back across the clearing. Narrowing my eyes, I scanned the treeline for the familiar x of the trail markers. It was more difficult in this light, but I managed to follow the markers through the darkening woods.

As the forest turned black with night, I cursed under my breath.

"Fuck," I muttered, coming up on a mossy tree for what felt like the fifth time. Glancing back and forth, I noticed that more trees were marked than I remembered and my footprints crisscrossed through the snow.

I was lost.

And this was all her fault.

"Kitsune! You fuck me and then get me lost in the woods. I need to find shelter for the night! It's getting dark." I felt like I had lost my mind screaming those words out into the trees, but my eyes widened when a gleeful laugh answered me back.

A few feet in front of me, a white tail curled out from behind a tree before disappearing into the

night.

I stepped closer and another amused giggle ran out through the wood, another twitch of a tail from behind a tree.

“Ah, so you want to play, little fox?” A smile crept across my lips as I followed her deeper into the forest.

Just when I felt that my feet were frozen in my boots and that my legs could no longer carry me, I arrived at the gaping mouth of a cave, the kitsune’s lively laughter echoing out from inside.

I ran my thumb across my lip with uncertainty. Bears were known to frequent these woods, coming down from their home in the mountains in search of food, but at this time of year they were usually deep asleep in their dens. One could be sleeping in this very cave. Although the kitsune was a trickster, I didn’t get the feeling that she would put me in any real danger. She had answered when I yelled out to her in frustration and led me to this cave. If she truly wanted to harm me, she could have let me freeze in the cold.

I took a deep breath before shuffling through the entrance of the cave. A warm glow caught my attention and I followed the sliver of light. Brighter and brighter, the light shined until the tunnel of the cave opened up into a large chamber. There in the center of the floor was a fire, the flames reflecting off the walls and warming the room.

The kitsune.

“Thank you,” I mumbled the words under my breath, but I was sure that wherever she was, she could hear them.

I slipped off my ice-crusting boots and gloves and sat them by the fire to dry while I flexed my frozen appendages near the licking flames. After taking a deep drink from my waterskin, I ate the rest of my tofu to quell the hunger gnawing at my belly.

When I was finished, I spread the furs out by the fire and laid down, allowing the warmth from the flames to seep into my bones. My eyes drifted closed and thoughts of her filled my head. The feel of her body on mine, her furred tails wrapped around me, her twinkling laugh.

Those golden eyes seared into my heart as I slipped off to sleep.

I awoke to the embers of the fire smoldering next to me. The cave was cold and empty and my body was sore from sleeping on the hard ground. I groaned as I stretched out my aching limbs and collected my furs from where I had laid them out as a makeshift bed. Something near the fire caught my eye, a black bento box painted with delicate orange foxes chasing each other round and round the edges. I opened the container to find it filled with still warm dumplings. I smiled to myself as I ate the delicious morsels. I’d need this energy for today. There was no way I could return to my parents empty-handed. I would not fail.

My boots had dried overnight and I slipped them back onto my feet, thankful to be starting the day with warm toes and a full belly. When I was dressed and ready for the hunt, I tucked the bento box into my satchel and began the trek through the winding cavern back out into the forest.

The woods were quiet as I emerged from the cave and the sky was the telltale hazy gray of impending snow. I heard the gentle tinkling of bells amongst the trees and my lips curled up in a smile.

“Thank you for the dumplings. And for leading me to the cave. I am in your debt.” I dipped my head in thanks. The jingling of the bells ceased and bitter silence settled over the woods once again. It appeared that this morning she would not reveal herself to me. I tried to push down my hurt, tugging my belt tighter and adjusting my bow where it sat on my back. I had no time for her games anyway. I was here to hunt.

For several hours I trudged through the snow looking for any sign of game when I finally came upon the tracks of a hare. I scanned the horizon, struggling to make out the animal’s form from the snowy landscape when movement caught my eye. The hare flicked its ears back and forth, listening momentarily before lowering its head to nibble on a few sprigs of grass by a downed tree. Silently, I removed my bow from my back and notched an arrow, just like I had the day before.

On an exhale, I released the arrow and held my breath as it flew towards the hare. Hitting its mark, the arrow stuck out from the animal's body, a small pool of blood already gathering around the corpse.

“Yes!” I threw my arms up with a cheer before walking to retrieve my kill. The arrow slid out of the hare’s body with ease, and I wiped it in the snow before returning it to my quiver. I held up the tiny animal and examined it before pulling out my hunting knife to process the meat. It was small, but at least I wouldn’t be returning home empty-handed. When I finished, I rubbed my hands through the snow, leaving behind splotches of bright red blood against the stark white backdrop. Delicate snowflakes flew down from the sky and collected in my hair and eyelashes.

I had to make a decision.

One hare would not be enough to feed my family but with the incoming snow, it was likely that most of the game would be holed up in their dens, waiting out the poor conditions.

I sighed and ran a hand through the black strands of my hair. I had made my choice. I would start heading back to the village.

But leaving the woods meant leaving her.

“Kitsune,” I spoke the words low and even, “I have decided to return to the village. The snow will send the game to their dens. Reveal yourself to me. Send me off.” There was a pang of despair in my voice that shocked me. I didn’t want to leave without seeing her again.

I sat on the downed tree and waited.

And waited.

But she never appeared.

No tinkling bells or giggles or golden eyes.

Just the snowy silence of the forest and my own breaths.

I rose with a groan and began following the markers on the bare trees. I went on like that for hours as the snowstorm worsened around me, shocked at how far I had traveled over the previous day. It became more difficult to make out the trail markers as the storm raged and thick sheets of snow whited out the wood. In the distance, I could make out the form of a creature snuffling through the snow, its nose buried deep in the powdery flakes.

“Kitsune!” I yelled out, the words muffled by the snow falling around me as I ventured closer.

An ear-splitting growl broke through the maelstrom, louder and deeper than any I had heard in my life. A dark figure lumbered closer.

This was not my kitsune.

It was a bear.

With surprising speed, the animal charged me with hatred in its eyes and long ribbons of drool hanging from its jowls.

I fumbled for my hunting knife and steeled myself into a fighting stance. There was no way I could outrun the beast, at least not in a snowstorm.

I had to fight.

“Kah!” I bellowed when the creature was within arm’s length, jabbing wildly with my knife as the animal swiped at my body with sharp, pointed claws. My heart beat a rapid rhythm in my chest and I surrendered my body to the spirit of the fight, relying on my training to best the beast.

My furred opponent was slower than most of the humans I regularly faced, but he was strong. With a slash of his claws across my chest, I felt a searing hot pain as blood blossomed through my furs. It dripped down my body and onto the snow, leaving a trail of crimson behind with each step I took.

The beast took advantage of my distraction and hooked its claws into my tattered furs, relentlessly drawing me closer to its gaping maw, its yellow stained teeth snapping in anticipation. My arm connected with the bear’s fangs and I screamed out in pain as it tore through my flesh, shaking its head in unison with my cries.

I had to do something, or this bear was going to kill me.

With the creature preoccupied with ripping off my arm, I stabbed at its neck repeatedly with the sharp blade of my hunting knife. The beast's blood coated me in warm sprays, torrents of sanguine liquid shooting out of the animal’s neck with each beat of its heart. Its grip on my arm loosened and the bear swayed slightly beneath me, but I continued my adrenaline-fueled assault, jabbing at the beast again and again.

Finally, it collapsed in the snow in a pool of blood, dragging me down with it. I stared at the bear's glazed, unseeing eyes. The movements of its chest had ceased, and I was able to pull the remnants of my mangled limb free from its mouth.

With a groan, I extracted my arm and clutched it tightly to my chest. Despite the cold, beads of sweat dripped down my temples and my chest heaved up and down rapidly. Blood poured from my arm at an alarming rate and I was beginning to feel lightheaded.

I had killed the bear, but I was going to die here. Alone in the forest, covered in snow.

I laid back and blinked my eyes as black specks clouded my vision.

“Kitsune,” I whispered, but no one answered. No tinkling bells or laughter, just the howl of the wind and the sting of snow on my wind burnt cheeks.

My eyes began to close, and it felt as if the world around me shifted. For what felt like hours, I faded in and out of consciousness, the sharp pain in my arm receding to a dull throb.

I heard a familiar screech and a whoosh of air as something landed down beside me. Using the last of my strength, I opened my eyes to see my falcon friend staring at me with his black, unblinking eyes.

He tilted his head, bringing his sharp beak close to my face, before racing off into the snowstorm with a shriek.

I inhaled a ragged breath before closing my eyes for what would likely be the last time.

ACT THREE: THE SAMURAI

“Shh, Haruto. You’ll wake him.” The soft voice echoed in my head and called to something deep within my soul.

“It’s fine, Akari. He’s lucky to even be alive. Good thing the poultice worked. If I hadn’t found him, he would have bled to death in the woods.” The other voice was deeper, more masculine. The way he flippantly discussed my death agitated me, but it quickly passed when a soft hand slid across my bare chest.

I released a deep groan as something cool pressed against my arm, but it didn’t hurt nearly as bad as I expected it to. A soft warmth spread through the tissue and soothed the lingering ache. It was as if I had sustained a sparring injury rather than lived through a close brush with death. Curious. I stirred slightly, but my eyes remained clamped shut, toeing the line between conscious and unconscious.

“I should go before he awakes fully. It isn’t time. Not yet at least,” the deep voice—Haruto—said, somber and full of regret.

“Be careful,” was all she replied before a familiar whoosh of air caressed my face.

Then we were alone.

“Kazuo,” my name sounded like a prayer slipping past her lips, “I know you’re awake. I can sense it. Look at me, Kazuo.”

Slowly, I raised my heavy lids and blinked my eyes to clear away the fog of sleep. I was back in the cave, positioned on a soft pile of plush furs. The warm glow of firelight danced off the craggy walls and my breath hitched in my chest the moment she came into focus.

She was dressed in white robes with delicate red detailing. Her black hair hung over her body in a long silken sheet and fluffy, pointed white ears twitched on her head as she stared down at me.

A single fang worried her plump red lip while molten golden eyes bored into my soul.

“It’s you,” I rasped, my voice hoarse from sleep.

“It’s me,” she said with a shy smile. “Here, drink.” She held out my waterskin and I took a deep drink. The cool water felt like heaven on my dry tongue.

When I was finished, I pulled myself to a sitting position—careful to keep the furs positioned over my naked body—and watched as the light of the fire illuminated the planes of her face.

“What happened? I remember the bear but after that...I was badly injured.” I flexed my sore arm, glancing at the healed skin in disbelief. For a moment, we sat in silence with nothing but the crackle of the fire lingering between us.

She looked away and ran her fingers through her hair, mulling over her words in her head before speaking them. “Haruto found you. After you called for me. I—I didn’t hear you. We applied a special poultice to your wounds, but we were worried it was too late. You lost a lot of blood. I almost failed you, Kazuo.”

I hated seeing her upset like this. It was in stark contrast to the confident woman who had fucked me with reckless abandon in the woods. I groaned as I leaned forward and stilled the hand she had tangled in her hair.

“Akari, is it?” I asked while smoothing my thumb across her knuckles and she nodded her head. “You didn’t fail me. You saved me. Without you and Haruto, I would have died. Either from my

injuries or the cold.”

Haruto.

The last thing I remembered before passing out was the falcon. The whoosh of air. Understanding hit me. “The falcon. Haruto is the falcon.”

Her face lit up at my realization and she gave another slow, confirming nod of her head—but this time she also flicked her ears forward in agreement. I wondered what it would be like to run my fingers over the soft fur while I fucked her.

Her dainty nose twitched and her cheeks reddened.

“What?” I asked, my voice low and throaty.

She brought her face closer to mine and a plush, white tail caressed my neck.

“Your arousal. I can smell it,” she said with a coy smile, that fang digging deeper into her lip.

I reached for her—thankful that I was healed enough to touch her—and pulled her tiny body down until she was straddling my hips, just as she had been in the woods.

Except this time, I was free to use my hands to explore her body. Her tails fanned out behind her back as my square fingers fumbled with the silk tie of her robes. She slid the light piece of material off of her shoulders with ease, revealing the peaks of her perky breasts.

My cock throbbed beneath her and I threw back my head with a pleased grunt as she began to move her hips.

“What do you want, Kazuo?” She asked with a slow pass of her pussy over the tip of my cock, the fur pelt the other thing separating our bodies.

“I want to fuck you. Like in the forest,” I groaned.

In one swift movement, her tails had yanked away the furs and she lined my cock up with her entrance. She was already wet from grinding her body into mine and with a satisfied sigh she slid down my shaft until she was seated to the hilt.

“Kazuo,” she moaned before slamming her lips into mine. Her mouth was warm and inviting, our tongues sliding back and forth before she nipped my lower lip with her fangs, adding the metallic taste of my blood to our kiss. The mixture of pain and pleasure was heady. I couldn’t get enough of it—couldn’t get enough of her.

“Fuck, Akari,” I panted into her mouth as I white-knuckled her hips, my body meeting her thrust for thrust. The furred tips of her tails tickled my thighs, and on my next thrust, one grazed my tight ring of muscle. My muscles clenched on their own accord and my cock twitched inside of her. The tails... I really liked the tails.

Akari broke our kiss and looked at me with a scheming smile as she slowly rode me. “Kazuo. Do you need more?” she asked, obviously amused by my reaction to her tails.

“Yes. Please.” I groaned—no, begged—my voice once again taking on that edge of desperation that only she could reduce me to.

Slowly, she rose off of my shaft and stood next to me.

“W—wait. What are you—” I fumbled over my words, my cock standing up painfully straight as I gazed at her with hooded eyes.

“Have you ever been touched here, Kazuo?” she asked as the tufted fur of her tail crept between my cheeks and grazed against my hole once more. My body shuddered from the contact.

“It’s wrong. I—I can’t.” I struggled to get out the words as images of her using those tails on me in wicked ways clouded my thoughts.

She cocked a perfect dark eyebrow at me and put a hand on her hip. “Trust me, Kazuo. Turn over. Bare yourself to me.”

I hesitated for a moment, but did as she asked until I was positioned on all fours with my ass high in the air. I had never felt so vulnerable, so exposed.

“Good boy. Now close your eyes,” she instructed with a voice that demanded submission. My cock twitched at her praise. I wasn’t used to being in this position, to be the one giving up control. But there was something alluring about her dominance. She had taken care of me in the forest and again after my injuries. Our past sexual encounter had been consensual and enjoyable. I had no reason not to trust her.

I clenched my eyes shut and waited, my cock painfully hard between my legs. I needed more. I needed her to touch me. Something. Anything.

Just as I was about to curse her name, a soft tail slid down my spine, stopping right above the globes of my ass. Then another joined it. They slid between my cheeks, grazing my entrance and my taint in soft, measured strokes that had me panting. I moved a hand to touch my cock, but two tails snapped my wrists together and pinned my hands above my head.

I groaned with frustration and Akari’s airy laugh echoed off of the cave walls before she spoke. “Patience, Kazuo. There’s pleasure in the teasing.”

The sound of a carafe opening filled the chamber and warm liquid pooled on my lower back, sliding down over my ass.

Akari slid her tails back and forth through the slick substance before returning her attention to my hole. With gentle strokes, the lubricated tips of her tails massaged my rim, tickling and teasing but never penetrating. My heavy pants filled the cave and the slit of my cockhead dripped precum down onto the furs.

I needed friction.

I needed penetration.

“Akari,” I said through clenched teeth, “Please. I can’t.”

A loud crack broke the air and I bit back a deep groan. The plump cheek of my ass burned but the slight sting was nothing compared to the ache of my cock. Akari chuckled darkly, amused by my response.

She had spanked me with one of her oiled tails.

“Now Kazuo, what did I say about being patient, love? I’ll give you what you need.” Her voice was lower this time. Heavier. I felt the slick tips of her tails slide over my ass before brushing against the puckered hole of muscle. They teased the ring slightly, gliding in just the slightest before receding again. Over and over, she repeated the motion.

The sensation was maddening. I was a panting, groaning mess with Akari at my back as her tails lightly breached the confines of my body. I had never been touched there—never been touched in this way.

When I thought I couldn’t take another moment of her teasing, a tail entered me fully, the taut ring of muscle burning with the stretch. The pain was only momentary though. Faster, Akari continued her assault, writhing her tail in and out before I felt the distinct feeling of another tail joining in.

“Fuck!” I groaned. It was a complex mixture of pleasure and pain that had me arching my back with need yet fighting to shake free of the tails that were holding me prisoner.

My reaction just spurred Akari on. Deeper the tails burrowed into my channel until they rubbed

against something that sent a jolt of pleasure straight through my core. My cock was throbbing and dripping thick beads of precum. My balls were tight stones against my body.

Faster, they stroked that place deep inside me as I panted with need.

“Do you want to come, Kazuo?” she asked, her voice calm and as smooth as silk.

“Yes, fuck, please.” I moaned through clenched teeth as my body humped the air wildly, searching for friction.

The next moment, those tails played a wild rhythm over the spot, twisting and strumming until my cock was shooting cum all over the pile of furs beneath me.

“Fuck. Fuck!” I grunted as my body shook with the last waves of my orgasm and her tails stilled inside of me. Gently, she extracted one and then the other, until my body was empty.

Without a word, I collapsed on the furs with my arm covering my face. I couldn’t bear to look at her—at least not yet. What I allowed her to do to me was wrong, but it was a pleasure the likes of which I had never felt before.

Akari leaned down and put a soft hand on my knee. “Kazuo, I—”

She was interrupted by a familiar shriek and a whoosh of cool air.

“Haruto,” Akari said shyly.

Even though I was embarrassed about the current state that I was in, I withdrew my hand from my face to get a better look at Haruto.

He was shorter than me, just barely taller than Akari, with dark eyes and black hair that was cropped close to his head. His face was youthful and clean-shaven and he would have been attractive if his mouth wasn’t twisted over with a sneer.

“Akari. What did I tell you about playing with the human without me—again?” Haruto said before leaning up against the cave wall and picking at his cuticles.

I didn’t like him taking on that tone with the kitsune. For some reason, I was fiercely protective over the little fox and I wouldn’t tolerate him disrespecting her in that manner.

I stood, aware of my nudity, and stalked over to where Haruto was lounging against the wall. He barely had the chance to focus his brown eyes on mine before my hand was clasped tightly around his neck.

“How dare you speak to her that way. Show her some respect.” My angry words and my close proximity to his face sent little beads of spit flying right onto his lips. His eyes flared to life with something—it couldn’t have been lust—as his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

I released him and he winced as he brought a hand over his throat to rub away the pain.

“Oh, how cute. Kazuo is already protective of you, Akari. Already playing the part of the samurai. And just in time, too.” He cocked his head and stared at me with those same unblinking eyes as the falcon always did. “You might want to get yourself cleaned up, samurai. Your little village? It’s burning to the ground.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

UPCOMING WORKS

Warts and All
(Monstrous Mates #1)
September 2022

I'd finally wrenched myself free of Chad's grip, only to find myself drowning in debt from student loans. When a job opportunity drew me to the edges of the Millwren-Frederick bog, I saw the 36.2-acre stretch of wetland as my unexpected ticket to freedom.

But something else waited for me, too. Deep in the bog, amid the song of crickets and the flash of fireflies, a pair of cold-blooded hearts ran hot—for me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley writes sweet omegaverse and monster romance. She lives in Maryland with her husband, daughter, five dogs, and three cats. When she isn't immersed in all things books, she works full time as a veterinary anesthesia technician. She loves coffee, candles, fall weather, mid-century modern furniture, and a good alien romance (complete with fancy peens).

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Rusalka

There are many reasons men shouldn't venture too deep into these woods, especially on a night when the air is already flavored with death.

One of those reasons is me.

Driven by an instinctual need, I haunt this forest, seeking prey to satisfy my hunger for blood and my lust for flesh.

Who shall fall victim to my beautiful trap tonight?

Konstantin

My world turned to dust years ago when I lost my *lisichka*, my little fox. Her death was the worst thing to happen to me, with every day since then clouded by grief.

Then I find myself lost in the woods, running from a horror I thought only existed in folklore. Now I'm the prey, and the predator chasing me is my worst nightmare—and my darkest dream.

Will death finally pull me under where I belong?

POSSIBLE TRIGGERS

Graphic sex and language.

Blood drinking and violence

Addictive personality representation

Grief from past suicide

Mild cliffhanger (their story will continue)

HONEY TRAP

Rusalka

I emerged from the pond to the sounds of terror and the scent of death—a delicious symphony for the senses.

While my sisters and I occasionally lured unsuspecting victims away from their routine patrols, the dozens of panicked men currently running blind through the forest was a veritable feast, simply begging to be enjoyed. Some would soon be under the spell of my fellow Rusalka, others were already being devoured by the Likho—the embodiment of evil fate and misfortune. A few were foolish enough to pursue the Baba Yaga as she escaped their cursed Facility with one of her three fated Riders at her side. The one I almost stole from her.

But that is a tale for another day.

Right now, I hungered for human flesh, and saw no need to wait for my sisters to awaken before commencing my hunt. Rusalka were fearsome, unholy spirits—the earthbound remains of women and young girls who'd met an untimely end in watery depths. Due to the nature of our deaths, we were doomed to haunt these woods until our designated time was done, or until we were avenged.

I no longer remembered my human life, but the moment of my passing occasionally brushed against the surface of my memories, always half-formed and insubstantial, taunting me with its vagueness.

Who was I?

Shaking my head, I banished the useless concern and refocused on alleviating the insatiable hunger making my fangs ache and my stomach tighten—the maddening instinct to feed driving me ever onward. My bare feet soundlessly carried me through the nighttime forest, the damp moss and leaf litter maintaining the vital connection to water I needed to survive, along with the diet of prey I was seeking.

I took a deep inhale, still catching a hint of blood on the breeze, along with the rich, earthy smells of the forest. The other Rusalka didn't seem to care about the beauty of the forest we inhabited. Our conversations were usually focused on the hunt, so I kept my romantic notions to myself, but I couldn't help noticing how the stars were brighter here...

...all the stars in Siberia...

The warm summer wind flitted through the trees, drying my naked body and running its ghostly fingers through my long, red hair—an unusual color among my kind.

Red...like a little fox...

Again, I ignored my fleeting memories, seeing no reason to dwell on what I didn't understand. Regardless of who I was before, or how these lingering echoes flavored my current existence, I was now to be a bringer of death, desirable to men too stupid to recognize a snare when it had been set for them.

I loved the moment they realized they were doomed—their fear and panic like a drug running through my veins, sickly sweet and addicting. They were nothing but flies attracted to the beauty of a carnivorous flower only to helplessly drown in the honey as victims of their own mistakes. My lip curled as I imagined how my prey's blood would taste on my tongue—tangy and metallic, pulsing with life—how satisfying he would be.

Who shall fall victim to my trap tonight?

SKAZKIS

Konstantin

W *as it all a trap?*

I'd only been at the Facility a month, and apparently it was the wrong fucking month to join the organization. I should have known the perks and ridiculous salary advertised at the recruitment event in Moscow were too good to be true, but I was desperate. Looking back, I probably would have signed away my organs to the black market if it got me away from the memories I was drowning in.

A few psychopaths aside, most of the other recruits were good guys, and the weapons training and daily patrols in the surrounding forest gave me something to focus on besides my pain. About a week ago, directives abruptly changed, and simply tagging animals turned into tranquilizing them to bring back to the Facility for testing. Even though I saw no evidence of harm coming to these animals, it still bothered me, but my overwhelming grief made it easy enough to ignore any suspicions that something wasn't right.

Then our boss returned from Siberia with his missing son and an old woman everyone kept calling an actual witch. I didn't know the guy well myself, but word in the mess hall was that he'd disappeared weeks ago with two other recruits who never returned. Again, I brushed off the rumors, since it really wasn't my business either way.

In hindsight, I probably should have made all of this my fucking business.

My foot caught on a tree root in the inky blackness, sending me crashing to the forest floor with a muffled curse. The blood-curdling screams of my fellow recruits were enough to get me back on my feet, and I hurried on, trusting in my innate sense of direction to get me to the nearest service road, about a mile away.

This running for my life business was just one more shitty thing on top of the shit hand I'd been dealt. A lesser man would have given up by now—and there were dark nights when the idea of ending it all had clawed at my door like a hungry wolf—but *something* always kept me going. I had no idea what that magical something was, as the only person who meant anything to me took my heart with her when she died. I mentally paused for a moment, realizing the anniversary of her death was fast approaching.

Fuck, it's been almost 4 years since I lost her.

My heart rate settled a bit as I left the chaos behind, although my senses stayed on high alert for any monsters waiting to pick me off in the dark. Like every Russian, I'd grown up listening to *skazkis*—dark fairy tales that often included supernatural creatures lurking in the woods. Like most kids of my generation, I'd ignored my grandmother every time she tried to bore me with another superstitious warning.

“Listen well, Kostya! You never know when this may save your life.”

I racked my brain for any nuggets of wisdom to help in my current situation, but quickly realized talismans and riddles would do me little good. Right now, I just needed to get the fuck out of this forest alive.

My brain grew foggy with what I assumed was dehydration and exhaustion, and I vaguely wondered if I'd gotten turned around somehow. The surrounding forest was eerily quiet, and the lack of moonlight made it difficult to see, but *something* was standing in the shadows up ahead, blocking

my path. Something was waiting for me—calling to me.
A woman.

CORPSE REVIVER NO 2

Konstantin - 5 Years Earlier

She was the most beautiful thing I ever saw. Working at an infamous absinthe bar only accessible through a Chinese takeout restaurant meant that not much impressed me, but from the moment she arrived, I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

The rest of her group comprised the typical party girls who always got past the doorman—all short skirts and cosmetically enhanced faces—but she had an almost wholesome look that made me wonder why the hell she was even in a place like this.

“What can I get you, *lisichka*?” I smiled as she approached the bar, the nickname for “little fox” slipping past my tongue before I could stop it.

She blushed, her cheeks turning almost as red as her hair. “Oh! Um, well, I don't really know. I've never tried absinthe before...” Nibbling her bottom lip, her gaze swept over the various bottles behind me before drifting to where her friends had already taken over a couch. She was clearly out of her element, both in setting and company.

I hummed thoughtfully. If I had to guess, she'd been dragged along on a work outing with people she barely knew who thought drinking absinthe made them adventurous. To me, it was just another ingredient for a delicious cocktail, and I decided to make it my personal mission to show this woman she could not only handle it, but that maybe she needed to find some more interesting friends.

And give me her number while she's at it.

“All right,” I replied, resting my elbows on the bar and bringing her attention back to me. “Tell me your name and what you normally drink. I'll take care of you tonight.”

The woman laughed, and I immediately knew I needed to hear that sound again. “Is giving the bartender my name part of the recipe?” She already looked more at ease as she slid onto the bar stool in front of me, her floral summer dress sliding up her thighs distractingly. “I'm Margo, and I usually order margaritas, to be honest.”

Margo likes margaritas. Perfect.

“Well then, the Corpse Reviver No 2 will be right up your alley.” It was my turn to laugh as her adorable nose wrinkled in disgust. “Trust me, Margo. It's a strong one, but extremely tasty,” I purred, grabbing the gin and getting to work.

Flirting with customers was part of the bartender gig, but right now, I felt like a giddy teenager with how fired up I was. Margo was the epitome of a fresh-faced natural beauty. That gorgeous red hair of hers was practically glowing in the dimly lit bar, drawing me in like a moth to the flame. She smelled fresh and floral, and my brain actually felt like it was short-circuiting as I simultaneously imagined opening the car door for her *and* spreading her legs so I could bury my face between her thighs.

Shit, I need to get a hold of myself.

“I'm Konstantin,” I smiled at her again, realizing I'd been staring like an idiot. “And I've been working here long enough to recognize when a fish out of water walks into my bar.” I canted my head toward the obnoxious gaggle of girls on the couch who hadn't even noticed her absence. “So, what's the story there?”

Margo blinked in surprise, apparently unfamiliar with the fact that bartenders were also part-time psychics and therapists. “It's that obvious, huh?” I nodded, and she sighed. “Lana's an old friend from

college in town on a girl's weekend. When she asked if I could show her and her friends around, I agreed, but...it's been a long day." She paused to warily watch me shake the ingredients before adding, "We're just not the same people we were back then, you know?"

Straining her drink into a glass, I added an orange wedge before sliding it across the bar. I wanted to ask if she'd been more of a party girl in college or if *Lana* used to be more like her. Actually, I wanted to know everything about Margo, but swallowed down my invasive questions in favor of watching her reaction to the cocktail. I was rewarded for my restraint when she took a sip and released a moan of enjoyment that was downright sinful.

Ok, I've changed my mind.

That is the sound I want to hear again.

LULLABY

Rusalka

Sensing a human male nearby, I began to sing, allowing the tuneless melody to build in my throat and tumble out from between my jagged teeth. The wind carried the mesmerizing notes like an accomplice, coiling around my victim, cinching tighter as I lured him in.

I heard the snap of a twig underfoot as he came to a stop, obediently waiting to be collected. Despite my enhanced eyesight, the moonless night offered little light, cloaking the man before me in shadow. Something about him gave me pause, but as he was already under my thrall, he posed no threat to me.

All that matters is how he tastes.

Still singing, I turned on my heel and started leading the dazed man toward my pond. I was already fantasizing about how I'd toy with him once we arrived—how satiated I would be by the time I was done. Rusalka may be predators, but we were women first. The instinctual desire I had for the opposite sex—especially those of a certain build, with facial hair—was deeply rooted in me for reasons I couldn't explain. In the end, the men I chose were willing victims, and were always given the choice of a swift death or a night of sinful depravity before their demise.

And the latter usually won out.

We reached the edge of the pond and I surveyed the surrounding mossy beds, deciding where I would thoroughly enjoy my catch before drowning him in the depths. My concentration was broken as I realized the man was standing too close behind me—his hand lightly caressing my hair as he invaded my space.

“*Lisichka...*” he murmured, and I furrowed my brow, unsure why he would refer to me as a fox of all things. “You smell like roses.”

I turned to face him, running my razor-sharp fingernails along his bare forearms in the dark to settle him. “You have a choice, *Russki*. I can kill you now and quickly end your suffering, or give you a night of untold pleasure before painfully sending you to the *Nav*.”

He simply stood before me, his head cocked as if considering. Without warning, he leaned down and buried his nose against my neck, deeply inhaling before groaning as if in pain.

“Margosha?”

I stumbled backward in alarm, almost falling into the pond in my haste to put distance between us. My long-buried memories barreled to the surface, my past no longer hazy and insubstantial as an unarguable truth came to light.

Margosha was my human name!

There was no reason this man would know that. *Margosha* meant “pearl,” so I assumed his spell-addled brain was grasping for associations with the watery setting. A coincidence—nothing more.

“How is this possible?” he whispered, grabbing my wrist, this direct contact lighting my nerves on fire. “You *drowned*. I saw them put your body in the ground...”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I hissed, wrenching my arm free of his grasp. Losing his touch felt devastating, which only increased my rage at the unexpected situation. “You are *mine* and will do as I...”

To my astonishment, he dropped to his knees on the soggy moss, wrapping his muscular arms around my waist and yanking me toward him. “I *am* yours,” he croaked, resting his forehead against

my bare stomach. “I’ve been yours since I first saw you walk through the doors at Sochi.”

Sochi...

My brain felt like it was being electrocuted—fractured memories firing off shock waves of recognition so rapidly I could barely breathe. Sochi was an area of Russia on the Black Sea, but it was also a style of drinking absinthe...and there was an absinthe bar in Moscow called Sochi...

“You’ve mistaken me for someone else,” I curtly replied, desperately needing to *think*. The pit of dread in my stomach only increased when I heard my sisters returning from their hunts, singing as they approached our pond with their own spellbound men in tow.

I have to get him out of here!

If they saw my prize, they would expect a taste, as we shared all our spoils among us. This communal feast had never bothered me before, but I was suddenly covetous—ferociously so—and the thought of any other Rusalka touching what was *mine* instilled me with a rage so powerful I gasped.

There was no explanation for my behavior. I didn’t know this man—didn’t remember him, at least. *Parts* of me did, or wanted to, judging by how my cunt was dripping, inches away from his bearded face.

Digging my claws into his biceps, I forced him to stand before grabbing his hand and leading him deep into the forest again. Never had I felt afraid of these woods, but now I startled at every noise, determined to outrun any creature who might threaten my claim. This physical reaction went beyond the usual raw hunger for sex and human flesh. I wanted to fully enjoy this man in a way that felt more possessive—more protective.

I want to keep him.

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

Margo - 5 Years Earlier

Being with Konstantin was like riding a rollercoaster I never wanted to get off. Thanks to his ability to get our names on the guest list of every party in Moscow, my formerly quiet existence had been turned upside down. His sheer enthusiasm for life was exhilarating—and addicting.

Yet so delicious...

“What are you smirking about so sexily over there, *lisichka*?” Konstantin’s smooth voice snapped me out of my daydreams. Knowing he loved to play, I coyly batted my eyelashes and simply shrugged in response. My game ended in a yelp of surprise as he tackled me where I lay on the couch, his much-larger body curling around me. “*Fuck*, you smell so good.” He pressed his face into my neck with a deep inhale. “I can’t get enough...”

I moaned as he ground his dick against me, my cotton panties dampening with need under my tights. We’d been dating now for almost 5 months, since a week after we met at Sochi, and we still hadn’t fucked. It wasn’t as if I were inexperienced, or that I didn’t crave the feel of him inside me. I just knew there’d be no turning back after that—no way I could ever let him go.

And I probably should let him go.

Despite us spending most evenings and every weekend together, Konstantin hadn’t noticed that anything was off about me. This was probably because our time together was spent in a blur of neon-lit clubs, bars, and private parties, followed by drunken cab rides that ended with our naked skin burning against the others’ beneath the sheets. I barely slept anymore, as my nights were spent either seated at the bar while he worked or on his arm at another exclusive event. By day, I dragged myself to my meaningless retail job, counting the minutes until I could repeat the cycle all over again.

Konstantin tried to monitor my alcohol intake while we were out, but I always sneaked in an extra drink or two behind his back. He adorably believed he was protecting his innocent girlfriend from going too deep, but in reality, I’d fallen over the edge long before I met him.

The memory of my college years was little more than a drug-laced fever-dream of countless bad decisions, including the men who ended up in my bed. I was constantly pushing my limits—the rush of dopamine only spurring me on to chase the next high. A near-death experience of almost drowning during an idiotic dare forced me off my dangerous path, and ever since then, I’d avoided anyone and anything that could lure me back to that lifestyle.

When my old college wing-woman, Lana, asked me to show her and her friends around Moscow, I agreed, assuming I’d be done with them well before happy hour. I should have known better—Lana always had a persuasive energy to her that was hard to refuse. Even so, I was determined to say my goodbyes after getting them settled at Sochi. Absinthe had never interested me before, and I assumed it would be easy enough to turn around and walk out the secret door, back to my life of safety, but fate had other plans.

Konstantin smiled at me across the bar, and the rest was history. He was movie-star handsome, with dark brown eyes that immediately drew me into their depths, perfectly coiffed hair, and a thick beard that only added a masculine dichotomy to his charmingly boyish smile. He’d made me laugh—something that I wasn’t doing much of at that point. His siren song was impossible to resist, and I was never very good at saving myself.

“Let me taste you, little fox,” he purred, shimmying down my body so he could flip up my skirt, quickly pulling down my tights and underwear. “I need a pick-me-up before we head to Kira’s launch party.”

I half-heartedly batted him away, but he simply grinned and threw my legs over his shoulders before enthusiastically diving in. Konstantin never pressured me for sex. He was always a perfect gentleman—albeit a roguish one who seemed determined to get me off at every opportunity, in any setting—but it only made me desire him more.

I am definitely in too deep.

“Eyes down here, Margo,” he commanded, effortlessly distracting me from the dark place I was spiraling toward, even if he had no idea of my inner turmoil. “I want to watch you fall apart.”

I couldn’t look away even if I tried. It still boggled my mind why someone like Konstantin had picked *me*, especially with how women stared at him everywhere we went. Whenever I dared to bring it up, he scolded me, saying it was love at first sight—that he loved me more than all the stars in Siberia.

Of course, *he’d* said “I love you” first.

The only one who’d said it.

His tongue was wet, hot torture, every lick bringing me closer to the edge, to the point of no return. As instructed, I kept my gaze locked on his, gasping through my release, my legs shaking and my hands yanking his hair harder than I meant to.

Drowning yet again.

When his mouth found mine, he kissed me until I was dizzy. He kissed me until I was so high off his presence, I deliriously promised forever, knowing full well this could never last.

NESTING DOLL

Konstantin

We ran until my lungs burned, although an upside to our midnight marathon was that my thoughts cleared enough for me to fully assess my situation.

My girlfriend is a zombie.

No. Not a zombie...

I shook my head, trying to knock some logic back into place to make sense of it all. She looked so much like Margo my chest ached, although there was a translucence to her skin that I'd only seen once before—on a day I wanted to forget. Her glorious red hair was plastered to her head as if it were still wet, and her teeth were definitely sharper than what I remembered, but this creature was familiar. A vague memory surfaced from one of my grandmother's *skazkis*...a reason to be wary of the woods...

Rusalka.

I sharply hissed through my teeth, wrenching my hand free and stopping dead in my tracks. Rusalka were beautiful sirens of the Siberian wilderness, undead creatures who fed on the flesh of humans—specifically human men.

The Rusalka immediately stopped, slowly turned to face me, deathly quiet. It was too dark to clearly make out her expression, but I soon felt her claws brush my wrist, attempting to grab hold again, and my revulsion disappeared. As her hand touched mine—the shape of it as familiar as my own—I realized just how broken I'd become.

I'll follow you anywhere.

“Wait,” I rasped, horrified that I was actually considering letting this creature lead me to my doom. It *couldn't* be Margo. She was six feet underground, and I was idiotically following a dangerous monster who'd somehow mimicked the love of my life.

But the way she smelled...

Fresh and floral—like roses.

“Margo, I need to know if it's really you,” I pleaded, practically begging to be deceived. Desperate for it.

“I...” the Rusalka faltered. “I don't know. Right now, I need to get you somewhere safe.”

I was so caught off guard by this reply that I simply allowed her to drag me along once again. All this creature had to do was assure me she *was* Margo, yet she seemed more confused than me. Oddly, it was this uncertainty that made me dare to hope for the impossible.

Margo had always been a fascinating mix of confidence and insecurity—sometimes boldly taking the lead and other times paralyzed by doubt. It took me months to learn things I usually found out on the first date, and even longer to get her to really open up. Every new discovery was like Christmas morning, even if it felt a little like twisting off the top of a *Matryoshka* doll only to discover a smaller version waiting beneath. As hesitant as she was to share, the more I learned about Margo, the harder I fell in love.

Something shifted between us the first time we fucked, not just in our relationship, but with Margo as a person. She blossomed like a flower finally being brought into the sunlight, and while I would've loved to give my dick all the credit, there was more to it than that. It felt like she finally trusted me—like she felt safe enough to let down her guard—and I vowed to spend the rest of my life maintaining that sense of safety.

Then I went and broke her trust.

Back in my nightmarish present, we abruptly entered a circular clearing with a tall willow at its center, its leaves draped over a stone altar covered in moss. Despite the openness, the air felt heavy and stifling, and I couldn't shake the feeling we'd trespassed into some magical place we shouldn't have. The Rusalka appeared unconcerned—if anything, she seemed relieved as soon as we reached the clearing—and I wondered if this was a haven for her kind.

Without the thick canopy above us, I could see more of her in the dim starlight, and it was all I could do not to pull her into my arms. I would know those glorious curves anywhere, had blindly found them in the dark countless times. Even the way she stood was familiar—one hip jutting out with her arms loosely crossed, as if deep in thought about her next move. She turned to fully face me and I almost dropped to my knees again as another rush of recognition shot through me.

“Lisichka...” I murmured, aching for her as I took a tentative step. “Tell me you don't feel this...” She growled like a cornered animal, but didn't attack me or run, so I took another step in her direction, close enough to catch that natural floral scent of hers that I swore was part of her genetic makeup. If this was a trap, it was a damn good one.

And I honestly don't know if I care to save myself.

“I feel *something*,” she harshly rasped, shivering, although I got the feeling the cold didn't bother her. “Like a...whisper. A memory I can't recall. There was so much water...I couldn't breathe...”

My heart was breaking all over again. I briefly closed my eyes, wondering if I'd died in the chaos—if my penance was to endlessly relive the worst day of my life. “You drowned,” I choked out, pulling her into my arms, uncaring if she ripped me to shreds. “They found your body in the Volga and determined it was suicide.”

She stiffened against me. “Suicide? Why would I have killed myself?”

Tears were now running freely down my face as I prepared to confess my darkest sin. “I don't think you did, Margo. If anyone's responsible for your death...it's me.”

BLOODLUST

Margo

My body felt like it had turned to stone, as ancient as Veles' altar at my back. It sounded as though he was confessing to murder—to *my* murder—but in my bones, I knew it wasn't true.

Even though my thrall was no longer holding him under my control, this man didn't feel like a threat to me. I wanted to sink deeper into his arms, to slice him open and burrow under his skin until I became an inextricable part of him.

Mine.

Relaxing in his hold, I reached between us to trail my claws over his stomach, feeling his muscles clench beneath his thin shirt. His reaction was extremely satisfying. Instead of the resigned horror my victims normally exhibited, this man was panting with need, grinding against me, so there was no mistaking his growing desire.

"Konstantin..." I whispered, his name appearing on my lips like a holy miracle.

How did I know that?

He momentarily froze before unleashing a growl that would have rivaled any creature in this forest. I yelped in surprise as he threw me to the ground, covering me with his much larger body and crashing his lips against mine. He licked his way into my mouth, demanding entrance and groaning as I nipped his bottom lip in retaliation.

"Say it again," he pleaded, smiling against my mouth. "I need to hear you say it again."

"Konstantin," I laughed breathlessly, a weight I didn't realize I'd been carrying lifting from my chest. "Do you like your name on my lips?"

"*Fuck, Margo,*" he gasped. "It's the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever heard. That," he abruptly pulled away and began sliding down my naked body, trailing kisses along the way. "And the way you sound when I make you come."

Oh?

The soft grass was cool beneath my overheated skin, the wind caressing the wetness between my thighs as he spread me wider. Eagerly lowering his face, he slowly licked his way through my folds, inhaling deeply and moaning as if *he* were the one receiving pleasure. A long-ago concern of how I tasted and smelled rose to the surface and I smirked. Such a *human* thing to worry about, and clearly unfounded, when the look on this man's face confirmed I was his favorite meal.

My fangs ached at the thought. I still hadn't fed tonight, but the idea of injuring Konstantin made me panic, so I tamped down the urge and dug my claws into his hair instead. I roughly tugged, curious about what he'd do. He groaned again in response, sliding two thick fingers inside me, curling them upward to rub a spot no man had bothered with in a long time.

Not since him...

Intense memories rushed through me of a cramped yet cozy apartment—my gaze rolling backward to the exposed beams overhead as Konstantin sucked on my clit until I was writhing, sweating mess on the couch beneath us. Now an observer in the room, I watched my human self regain her composure, shyly readjusting her clothes and gathering her purse before following him into the hallway. Something about witnessing this particular night bothered me, inspiring an insatiable urge to remind this man who he belonged to.

Growling low in my throat, I shot up with preternatural speed, flipping Konstantin onto his back before wrestling with his belt. He hurriedly pulled his shirt over his head before coming to my aid until he was as naked as I was. His thick cock strained toward me, precum already beading at the tip. Wasting no time, I straddled him and slid the full, hot length of him into my throbbing cunt.

“Holy shit,” he choked out, his large hands gripping my ass, guiding me to roll my hips. “I forgot how fucking good you feel. No one else has ever felt like this...”

I cocked my head, glaring down at him even as I continued to ride. “Have you had others since me?”

I will kill them all.

His expression was a combination of repentance and reverence. “Not many, *lisichka*.” When my continued scowl told him that answer was insufficient, he elaborated, “Yes, I eventually slept with a few more women. The first was only because her hair looked like yours, but she was nothing like you, nowhere close to what I wanted. She wasn’t who I missed more than anything...” He combed his fingers through the long, red strands covering my breasts before gently tugging, pulling me down for a sweet kiss that tasted of regret.

I was still unsettled—an echo of something *important* still whispering in my ear. This man may not have killed me, but he was somehow associated with the ill-defined angst I was feeling, which caused my primal instincts to roar to the surface.

Just a taste...

Tearing my lips from his, I wrenched his head to the side and sank my fangs into his neck, drawing a deep pull from his carotid before he could throw me off. To my surprise, he allowed it—his arms wrapping around my back to pull me closer, still thrusting beneath me. My instincts were screaming to both finish him and pull back before it was too late—my compulsion to bleed him dry warring with a deeper need to protect what was mine.

He wildly bucked as I drank him down, groaning so loudly it echoed off the surrounding trees. I was too far gone to stop, the sound of his fading heartbeat like horrific music to my ears. With his last breath, he emptied himself inside of me—his ultimate submission sending me over the edge of my own climax, even knowing I’d never forgive myself for taking his life.

ATONEMENT

Konstantin

Holding Margo in my arms one last time—feeling her wrapped around my dick—was a blessing I hadn't earned, but her being the one to kill me was poetic justice at its finest.

I deserved to die for what I did.

The inescapable fact was that *I* was the one who poured her last drink at Sochi. I always insisted on it, even when we weren't in my bar, because keeping my girl safe was my top priority.

It was supposed to be my top priority, I should say.

That night, I mixed her cocktail with a new brand of absinthe we'd recently got in, too distracted by a reporter interviewing me on the Moscow bar scene to think anything of it. The distillery claimed their product was one of the most authentic absinthes on the market—the highest proof allowed by law. Margo had been mine for a year at that point, so I mistakenly thought I knew what she could handle, but I should have tested it myself first.

In the middle of my interview, Margo had loudly announced she was going to the bathroom before stomping off. Clearly she was upset over something, but the reporter—a party-circuit acquaintance named Kira—quickly brought my attention back to our interview, so I planned to check on Margo as soon as we were done.

That opportunity never came, as the next time I saw my love was to identify her body in the morgue. It was the single worst day of my life, and a month later, the distillery was shut down for their shocking levels of thujone, confirming my worst fears.

I gave her the drink that killed her.

A week later, Margo's drowning was ruled a suicide, and I'd lost count of how many nightmares I'd endured. Even wide awake, my mind was plagued by what her final thoughts might have been—what psychedelic-induced hallucination made her choose the icy depths of the Volga over me.

“Do you truly believe your little glass of Kool-Aid caused all this to happen?”

With a groan, I opened my eyes, muscling through my pounding headache to face whoever was addressing me.

I found myself in the same small clearing with the willow tree and altar, although Margo was nowhere to be seen. An unfamiliar woman was peering down at me, but as my groggy vision cleared, I realized her *head* was the only human part of her. She had the body of an enormous bird—her blue and orange feathers glowing in the harsh sunlight—and the echo of my grandmother's stories told me exactly who this was.

The Gamayun.

This creature knew the secrets of the world's creation, and worked as a messenger of the gods, especially for the ruler of the *Nav*—the underworld.

“Veles sent you?” I croaked, disbelieving that one of the highest gods in the pantheon would take an interest in me, never mind that any of this was real.

“No,” the Gamayun scoffed, eyeing me judgmentally. “Although your little Rusalka girlfriend futilely prayed and pleaded for him to intervene.”

I furrowed my brow. “Who sent you, then?” Margo begging for my life was the last thing I expected after she rightfully took her revenge.

“The goddess Marena, of winter's death and dreams, had a vision,” she grumbled. “And as she is

otherwise occupied at the moment, she sent *me* to guide you two idiots toward your greater purpose instead.”

Greater purpose?

Before I could ask her to elaborate, the Gamayun curtly nodded at someone behind me. I spun to find Margo, looking pale and stricken, her gorgeous red hair doing little to hide her nakedness as she held berries in one hand and a wooden bowl in the other.

“Konstantin...” she breathed, tears filling her eyes, the anguish in her voice breaking my heart all over again. “I’m sorry. I...I couldn’t control it, couldn’t stop myself. I was so...*angry* with you...”

Being sucked dry by a Rusalka should have been my greatest fear, but seeing the love of my life blame herself for *my* actions was much worse.

“*Lisichka*,” I soothed, rushing over to lead her to the altar to sit. She tried to force me to eat some berries and drink water from the bowl before I could go on, but I pulled her into my lap instead. “You had every right to be angry. I should never have given you that cocktail. The absinthe was too strong, especially for someone who drank as little as you...”

“What are you talking about?” Margo interrupted, twisting to better face me. “It wasn’t the *drink* that made me jump. I’m still having trouble remembering, but...” She chewed her bottom lip in such a familiar way, it was all I could do to not kiss her again. “I think my decision had to do with jealousy over someone named...*Kira*.”

Oh no...

It all made sense now; how Margo’s behavior seemed off the last couple weeks of her life, which was right around the time my casual acquaintance Kira started coming by Sochi regularly to interview me for one of her vapid think pieces.

I closed my eyes as pure pain washed over me. Never in a million years would I have even humored the idea of cheating on Margo. She was my entire life, and the moment she walked into my bar, no one else could ever compare. While I’d known she had insecurities, I assumed my constant attention would keep her happy—that it would be enough.

That I was enough...

“It wasn’t your fault, Kostya,” the Gamayun softly spoke, and both Margo and I looked at her in surprise. “Your Rusalka was drowning in the depths long before she met you.”

I turned my attention back to Margo, finding tears running down her perfect face. “It’s true,” she choked out. “But I think I’m finally ready to come up for air.”

ALL THE STARS IN SIBERIA

Margo

For three days, we followed the Gamayun as she led us deeper into the forest, barely stopping to eat and rest before we arrived at the edge of a large, clear pond. On the far side sat an abandoned *Vardo* wagon, the only sign that a swan shifter clan had once settled on these shores.

Konstantin will need to learn that shifters are also real, I suppose.

The wagon was in surprisingly good shape, with walls still brightly painted and the embroidered furnishings more dusty than anything. There was clothing waiting for both of us and the small kitchen was well-stocked with non-perishable food and supplies for planting a garden.

Before she flew away, the Gamayun left strict instructions we were to remain here until three strangers came to call. She didn't elaborate on their identities, but hinted that they could provide a solution to the challenges of our pairing.

We may have been compatible in life, but a relationship between a human male and a Rusalka wasn't very practical. I knew I could hunt for the blood I needed—determined not to put Konstantin at risk with my hunger ever again—existences were vastly different. I also worried how my city boy would manage in the Siberian wilderness.

“Oh, cool, a fishing pole!” Konstantin excitedly called down from where he was digging through rooftop storage bins. “Haven't used one of these since I was a kid visiting my grandmother, but I bet my expert wrist action will come in handy for casting like a pro.” He lewdly winked and made a gesture that looked suspiciously like jerking off before climbing down from the roof to join me again.

“Yes, I'm sure mixing drinks at Sochi equipped you for surviving in the middle of nowhere,” I schooled my face into an expression of innocence, knowing it spurred him on. “Unless, of course, you were insinuating something else.”

He smirked and roughly pulled me into his arms, making me gasp. “Don't play coy with me, *lisichka*. I think you were already a maneater when we met—you just hid it well.”

Touché.

The longer I spent with Konstantin, the more flashes of my human life I recalled, specifically my time with him. I was ashamed by how much of myself I'd hidden from someone who wanted to know me—to love me unconditionally. Even though I hardly deserved it, the gods had given me a second chance.

One goddess in particular.

“Well, there's no point in hiding anymore, is there?” I purred, possessively grabbing his hardness through his pants, making him groan with need.

My display of dominance didn't last long. Konstantin easefully threw me over his shoulder and carried me, laughing, into the *Vardo*. I was tossed onto the cushion-covered bed, bouncing slightly against the velvet fabric before he flipped up my dress and ran his tongue through my wetness, both of us moaning as one.

The thin summer dress I was wearing was nothing but a distraction. I'd grown used to being naked—and the elements didn't affect me anymore—but it seemed a pity to waste the wardrobe. It also didn't escape my notice that a thin layer of fabric made my human desire me more, especially when I wore nothing underneath.

It seems he still enjoys uncovering my secrets.

“Fuck, you’re still as delicious as the first time I tasted you,” he murmured against my pussy, shifting slightly to pull his cock out.

I growled possessively at the sight, annoyed that he wasn’t positioned where *I* could easily reach it. He chuckled low, sitting back on his heels, continuing to lazily stroke himself with a knowing expression on his handsome face. “Is there a problem, little fox?”

Konstantin knew first-hand the dangers of baiting me, but he seemed to enjoy the risk. My vision went momentarily red as I shoved him onto his back and batted his hand away with a snarl.

That’s mine!

He threw his hands up in mock-surrender. “Take over if you insist, Margosha. Just try not to bite it off with those sexy fangs of yours...”

I scoffed, licking my way up his shaft before torturously circling my tongue around the head until I’d wiped the smirk off his face. Mindful of my sharp teeth, I swallowed his full length, smugly drinking in his moans until he was helplessly bucking into my mouth—completely mine once again.

And don’t you forget it.

Waiting until he was on the edge, I abruptly pulled back and slid off the bed. Maintaining eye contact, I lifted the dress over my head and carelessly dropped it to the floor before running outside again.

I didn’t get far—didn’t want to—before I was tackled from behind and taken to the ground. Roughly nudging my thighs wider, Konstantin entered me in one smooth thrust, bottoming out with a groan that I echoed with a ragged cry.

Covering my body with his, he propped himself up on his elbows and began a punishing rhythm, our skin slapping together and sounds of pleasure the only noises disturbing the descending twilight.

“I’m never letting you go again,” he growled in my ear, burying a hand in my hair to better hold me down. “If you try to hide from me—even if it’s at the bottom of the fucking Volga—I will find you, and bring you home.”

Home.

My orgasm barreled through me, taking me by surprise as grateful tears streamed down my face. “I love you,” I gasped, realizing I’d never told him while I was still alive, even though I knew it all along.

He deserves to be loved.

Konstantin groaned through his release, the sensation of him filling me up causing a second climax to ripple through me. Withdrawing, he lay on his back, gently rolling me over to tuck into his side. I caught my breath, gazing up at the stars twinkling into view, wondering how many nights we had left together, and praying I could be absolved for my mistakes.

As if sensing my regret, Konstantin softly kissed my forehead and pulled me more tightly against him. “I love you too, Margo. More than all the stars in Siberia.”

Maybe I deserve it too.

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BLURB

The Woods are... Monstrous, Dark and Deep.

Not all fae are pretty...some are frightening.
Claws, thorns, and tentacles.
Nightmares from shadow.
I was promised to the worst of them all.

The Prince of Death.

He comes to my dreams, devours me at night.
He means to consume every part of me.
But my broken heart sings to him
as it calls to the other hellish creatures who crave me too.

My family were the ones who stole dark magic from the Unseelie fae. For seven years, my blood and sacrifices are supposed to pay the price.
But the spark between us holds a secret.

It runs through my veins.
Power only a queen should have.
Twisted. Dormant. *Dangerous*.

Humans aren't meant to be divine.

The Monsters of the Dark Fae will hunt me down. The Starless Royals will bathe in my blood. The Sluagh will consume me.

But Gods may cry, the deadly host shall rise, and the world will weep...

before ***My Monsters***
let them have me.

CHAPTER ONE

H *earthbreak.*

It always draws me in, the heady scent of loss.

She's dripping in it, stained by it. I can taste her sorrow on the wind like a wretched feast—delicious to me. The need to hunt and embrace her with the dusky smoke of my shadow self is overwhelming. I'd lure her here and now, devour her in an instant, if I could. I'd wrap my tendrils of love around and through her and steal her essence until she's thoroughly consumed.

However, in daylight, this forest is my prison. My inhuman form is bound to the trees when the energy of the blessed court is nigh. I cannot leave this place so easily. Only at night am I able to lead the terrible horde. Pathetic human trinkets, man-made metal, and iron bars on windows and doors can't keep me out.

Now I have her scent, I will possess her. The lonely and lost belong to me.

I am the Prince of Shadows.

And this one is all mine.

CHAPTER TWO

Riona

“Don’t look at the birds,” Ma says, harshly and quickly.

She snatches my hand tight as if by squeezing my fingers in her cold, dry palms she can control where my attention goes. She can’t, of course. I’ve been watching them for a while. Huge, gray birds circle in clouds above our heads as we stand over the grave of Uncle Danny, crying openly as if our hearts might break.

Mine already has.

Not because of Uncle Danny. I hardly knew him. I totally forgot Ma had a brother until she got the call that he was gone. He got drunk and fell into a ditch on his way home, apparently. No, I’m crying because my boyfriend, Connor, dumped me as he drove me from the house we rented together in London to the train station. I still can’t believe it. Every time I think of him telling me it’s over, it’s like my chest is about to cave in, compressing my lungs until I can’t breathe. It forces the life out of me so much that every time I see Uncle Danny’s grave, I feel fucking terrible. I’m wailing about some dickhead who dumped me instead of mourning over the family that’s passed on, being buried right in front of my eyes.

So, I’m looking at the birds.

But even they screech at me in mockery, making me wince.

“I told you. Keep your eyes on the ground, girl,” Ma hisses under her breath, her bony fingers in mine squeezing tighter. After a few seconds, I do as she says, sniffing back tears as a sob sticks in my throat. I would jerk my hand away, but the few people who’ve come to pay their respects are watching. They’re taking in every detail. They’re watching every move. Later they’ll regale the local pub with first-hand accounts of the service and the turnout. For the villagers of Largkirk, there’s nothing much else to do but gossip. We’ve only been here a couple of weeks, but I’ve figured that much already. Ma was justified in leaving when she could.

Keeping my gaze away from the harpies in the sky, I fix my stare on the dirt falling over the coffin instead. I focus on the flowers and the headstone. I know little about Uncle Danny. Aunt Cora has seen fit to tell us some things when Ma is fast asleep, and it’s just me and my sister awake in that big, empty house.

He was a good man.

He never hurt a fly.

He was a drunk, but he didn’t deserve what happened to him. Nothing. I feel nothing. *Fuck*. Ma lets go of me. She stoops down to scoop some of the loose soil. She throws it on top of the wooden coffin, a sigh leaving her body like her spirit is straining to vacate. Pía, on my other side, scoffs and goes back to picking at her black painted nails while the wind whips her hair into a frenzy. She’s younger than me by two years. Totally oblivious that it’s freezing in this cemetery. She’s not even bothering to look upset. How can she do that?

Everyone looks at me. It’s my turn to throw mud.

I narrow my gaze and study the ground while I plunge a stiff hand into the frozen earth. All eyes are on me, expectant. Ma is staring at me with red-rimmed ones. But I’m still empty inside when it comes to my uncle. I bite my lip and allow one stray thought about my ex to slip into the forefront of my mind.

How could he do this to me? Oh God, there must be someone else. I throw the dirt. *Ashes to ashes. Dust to my failed relationship.* Tears flow freely enough for me to choke, courtesy of Connor. Then I step back. Pía takes my place as I walk to where Ma is standing, who looks satisfied for once as I catch her eye.

The service carries on. Since I'm not allowed to stare at the sky, I scan the horizon instead. Where the woods meet the edge of the cemetery, someone is watching.

"Who is that?" Pía asks, suddenly leaning in, her voice low.

I squint, trying to see who it is. A guy. Our age, or thereabouts. I don't know him. There aren't many young people in town. In my imagination, Connor has come to ask for my forgiveness. It's not, but my heart wishes it was.

"It's probably just a villager."

"I've never seen him before," she says, squinting too.

"We don't know everyone," I huff. It's not Connor. He's too broad, too dark-haired to be him.

"Well, whoever he is, he's fit," Pía says softly, arching one of her perfectly plucked brows. My younger sister is a man-eater and a thousand times more beautiful than me. She got Ma's delicate features, whereas I just look like a troll on the best days. Whoever the cute guy is, by the end of the week, my sister will have him licking her boots, begging her to stay.

Suddenly, the birds scream in the air, demanding attention. The flock has gotten bigger. Everyone looks up, not just me.

"What the..." I say under my breath.

"Jesus. What freaky looking birds," Pía snorts.

Ma scowls at us, silently telling us to shut the hell up.

"They're not birds," says a gruff voice to our right. Pía and I both look to the man who said it next to us—Garrett Corbet, one of Aunt Cora's crazy neighbors. "It's the fair folk. Come for Danny," he says.

Ma gives him the evil eye since Garrett speaking to us is ruining her request for us not to talk. I want to ask him what he means, but Garrett is no longer looking our way. He's staring at his friend's grave. I let out a breath and focus on Uncle Danny in the ground. Pía goes back to her nails. Ma takes my hand again. No one but the priest says anything else for the rest of the service.

The wake is at the family house. There's a lot of somber drinking and whispered conversations taking up the entire downstairs—the kitchen, grand hallway, the dining room, the lounge, and two reception rooms. I make niceties until the point where I'm tired, cranky, and need to lie down. Ma would notice if I was gone, so I stay, trying to blend in with the brown and ochre wallpaper.

After a shot of whisky, three breadsticks, and several awkward conversations with the townsfolk who are curious about me and my sister, I'm hot and bothered. The house has become stuffy and small. Why are all the windows closed? I make my way into the kitchen and open the one above the sink.

Cold air blasts in, bringing with it the scent of lavender and mildew. Immediately, I feel better. I couldn't breathe in here. Taking a moment to peer outside, I can see the wood beyond the rising hill of the garden, though it's dark enough that most of it hides in shadow. There isn't a sound, except for the occasional hoot of an owl. It's a little creepy living in the thick of the wilds of Scotland. It's also soothing at the same time. My London flat looks over the main road and even at night, it's full of clamor and chaos.

How nice to have it every day. Not just for a holiday.

“What in God’s name are you doing?!” Aunt Cora scowls, hurrying into the kitchen. She places her tray of food down that she was carrying and leans over to slam the window shut, shoving me out the way she does.

“I just wanted some air,” I reply, letting a frown show on my face.

“These windows are not to be opened, do you understand?” she says, her tone severe.

I nod at her, my brow still furrowed. I really don’t.

She sighs. “Just keep them closed. If you’re hot, I can get the electric fan down from the attic.

Though, it is the middle of winter.”

I’m not sure blowing the same stale air around is going to help, but I nod anyway.

“Rí, where are you? I need you,” someone calls from the reception room that connects to the kitchen. It’s Ma. I’d recognize her demanding tone anywhere.

Cora gives me a sympathetic glance. “Ah, Nell. She hasn’t changed. She used to order me about when we were wee girls.”

I raise a brow, suddenly wanting to stay and grill Cora about her childhood. Ma doesn’t talk about her time here, and it’s strange to think there’s a whole life of hers I’m clueless about. *Was she similar to me as a kid, or Pía? Did Ma have any boyfriends? How did she meet Dad? Why did she leave her hometown and move to London after Dad died?* It never really bothered me before, but now I’m very interested.

After I see what Nell wants—another drink—I go outside. I’m still hot and the promise of an electric fan just doesn’t cut it. My jacket is missing from the cloakroom, but I don’t let that stop me. I need fresh air. Nobody mentioned not going out at night.

Surely, the garden is safe?

The garden to Ma’s ancestral home is large, and it doesn’t have a fence. I walk as far as the light from the house stretches, letting the crisp evening air chill my bones. I’ve no idea why I’m not supposed to open windows here, or look at birds. The people here have strange customs. Superstition never really bothered me. I walk under ladders, and I step on cracks in pavements. Not out of spite, but because I don’t try to avoid them. Ma wasn’t like this at home in London. I questioned her about the window. Her response was that I should listen to Aunt Cora with no explanation.

Voices draw me to the bottom of the garden. Two figures are sitting on the bench talking. One of them is Pía. I can tell by her tone, and the jacket she’s wearing. It’s my Canada Goose, the one that Connor bought me. The one I was looking for. The taller, broader figure has a deeper voice.

A guy, then.

Trust my sister to root out the one eligible male in a gathering for the dead.

CHAPTER THREE

Ríona

They stop talking as I get closer.

“Oh, it’s you,” says my sister. “I thought you were Ma for a second.” There’s a glow as the end of a cigarette is lit. In the dusky light, Pía takes a drag.

“I thought you’d quit,” I say, coming to a stop where the bench is in the small courtyard surrounded by what looks to be dead, thorny bushes.

She puffs out a lung full of smoke, laughing lightly. “God, no. Why do you think I still paint my nails black?”

“You shouldn’t smoke,” I say on automatic pilot, sounding like Ma and hating myself for it.

“Don’t you start Rí. Nell is enough to deal with.”

“So, you’re the virtuous sister?” asks the guy. I almost forgot he was there. He’s watching me though, making goosebumps creep up my arms with all the attention. I cast the same attention back to him, or try to, in the dark. It’s hard to make out in the low light. He looks like the same guy we saw at the edge of the churchyard. I study him now, taking in his hair, dark and messy like he just got out of bed, strong jawline, and piercing eyes. I can’t tell what color. The shadows cross his face in the right way, making him half-hidden. But I can tell he’s attractive. Someone I would fancy too, if Connor hadn’t ripped my heart out recently and fed it to the dogs.

He looks young, about my sister’s age. Not that I’m much older. There’s barely a couple of years between Pía and me. You’d think that would mean we get mistaken for twins, but no. As I said, she’s far prettier than me.

“Virtuous?” I say, coming back to the conversation, giving my sister a dark look. What has she been telling him? Pía is pushing her luck, being alone with a strange guy she doesn’t know.

“Rí. This is Kel, this is Rí,” she blurts. She must have picked up the sisterly concern.

“Actually, it’s Kellan,” the guy says languidly. He says it in a way that doesn’t sound pissy or annoyed. Just amused. His rumbling voice is graced with a beautiful Scottish lilt that would make any girl swoon.

“Kellan. Kel...whatever.” Pía snorts. She puffs out another cloud of smoke, making Kellan inch away from her slightly.

“Nice to meet you. I’m actually Ríona. Or Caitriona if you want to get anal,” I say.

Kellan stares at me, his lips twitching up at the ends. “I always want to get anal, Caitriona,” he says smoothly.

“I didn’t mean...” *Why the hell did I say the word anal?*

“Why don’t you join us? We were just talking about the rugged lands of the Scots and how it inspires you to write poetry.”

Poetry? Really? I shoot another glance at my sister. The only words she can string together sometimes is *Can you lend me?* Often, she doesn’t even bother to do that.

Shaking my head, I pull my cardigan around me a little closer. I’m tired and now I’m cold. I only came out for some air. Ma will wonder where I am.

I gaze back at the house.

“You’re cold,” Kellan says. “Here.” Without warning, the guy gets to his feet and drags his dark red sweater off his back. My jaw must have dropped open because I have to close it to formulate

words when he walks over. Standing there in only a vest, he hands it to me.

“I...I...” Looking at him, I don’t know what to say.

“What a gentleman,” I hear my sister purr.

“I can’t take this. You must be freezing,” I say. I can’t help staring at his bare arms inked with what appear to be thorny vines, wrapping themselves over every exposed part of him.

He chuckles, running a hand through his messy, unkempt hair. “I was born in the Hebrides. I don’t feel cold, lass.”

“Oh, just put it on, Rí. Wearing another man’s clothes doesn’t count as cheating on Connor.”

I blink at him, and then slowly put the sweater on. It’s warm and soft and smells of his cologne—a woodsy grassy scent that reminds me of summer in the forest. I’m in a daze as he guides me to the bench next to Pía, making me sit in the middle of the two of them.

It’s more surreal when Pía unearths a flask of whisky and passes it to me. She smirks. “Like old times behind the shed, eh?”

I take a sip of the burning liquid and glance back at the house. Lit from within, it’s very grand. Ruling the town from the crest of the hill. Our London home was not like this.

“Like old times,” I say. “Except, that house is a mansion compared to the London flat in Muswell Hill we grew up in.”

Kellan takes the flask from me and knocks it back. “Appearances can deceive.” He shrugs, amused eyes never leaving mine.

“What do you mean?” I ask. I’ve gotten used to how dark it is, enough that I can see him clearly to appreciate his profile. *He has lashes longer than mine. That shouldn’t be allowed.*

Pía sighs. “He means Uncle Danny was stone broke when he smashed his own head in, and Cora is probably going to sell to pay his gambling debts.” I glare at my sister. It’s one thing to gossip amongst us, but to do it in front of a stranger. “Oh, calm down, everyone in this town knows. It’s not a secret,” she says when she sees my face.

“It isn’t?” I ask Kellan.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “There are no secrets in Largkirk,” he says mysteriously, passing the flask back to me.

“How do you know Uncle Danny, anyway?” I ask, frowning. I’m not a fan of mysteries.

“Everyone in town knew Danny,” he says.

That’s not an answer.

“Not everyone attended the funeral,” I say.

My sister rolls her eyes. “Rí, do you have to grill him? You’re bringing the mood down.”

“I hate to tell you this, but we’re at a wake.”

Kellan laughs at that, watching me. He continues to observe me as Pía and I bicker back and forth. Sometimes a girl can tell when a guy is interested in her. Kellan is into me. It’s obvious. What I don’t know is how that makes me feel. I’m all too aware of how close he’s sitting. Every time his leg brushes against mine, electricity sparks between us. The scent of him from his sweater is doing strange things to my stomach, and the forgotten place between my thighs.

I’m just drunk. I’m not attracted to this gorgeous man with hardly any clothes on. It’s just been so long since Connor touched me, I’m desperate. That’s it. I’m starved of affection.

We finish the flask. I make my excuses to head back to the house. I’m far too giddy to stay and be coherent and sensible. Pía doesn’t stop me from leaving. When I sat next to her on the bench, she was

the one who kept kicking me every so often. Before I got up to leave, she whispered in my ear to leave the bedroom window open. What's she going to do? Climb the fucking drainpipe?

Despite the dimness of the garden, Kellan's piercing eyes bore into me as I awkwardly try to take his sweater off. "No, you keep it." As much as I like Kellan, I'm not into keeping strange men's clothes. I haul it off, shove it at him and then hurry back to the house, but not before I hear him say, "Nice to meet you, Riona. Come see me again."

What a weird thing to say. *Come and see me again.* Like our family garden and the woods are his domain and we are the ones intruding in it.

The wake is finishing up. I sneak past the staff clearing up, and the last few stragglers demanding more whisky. I head to the room Pía and I are sharing and quickly get changed into my pajamas—an old t-shirt and some shorts. Then I brush my teeth and get into bed. Just before I turn off the light, I remember to check my messages. I haven't bothered to look at them since I got here. Why would I? Connor and I are broken up. He won't be sending me anything. And I'm not in the mood to talk to my friends.

When I switch on my phone, I'm wrong about the last one. Connor has sent me a text. With dread and annoyingly a little spark of hope pooling in my stomach, I open it.

The lease ends on the 31st of the month.

You need to move all your stuff out by then.

C x

He signed it with an X.

Of all the shitty things...that's what he does.

Knots form in my stomach as all the desperate, painful emotions twist inside me. *Like I could forget.* I want to throw my phone at the wall, but I don't have the money to replace it. I chuck a throw pillow instead and then shove my head under the blanket. Finally, I let go of the sadness that's been welling up inside, all day and all night. It comes howling out.

Long after I've stopped my sobbing, I lie awake, unable to sleep. Why did I even come to bed? I could have stayed out. It was obvious Kellan wanted me to.

I wanted to.

I breathe out, allowing the painful thoughts of my ex to dissolve away and be replaced by someone sexier, hotter. Someone like Kellan. What a beautiful name for a gorgeous man. I'm an idiot. I ran away. *Why?* As soon as he took off his sweatshirt, I knew I fancied him. He's exactly my type. Dark and brooding, all ink, toned arms and chest.

What would it be like to be kissed by someone else? Caressed by someone else? Fucked by someone, not Connor?

Fucked by Kellan?

Wriggling out of my shorts and knickers, I hold on to that thought. I shove one hand under my t-shirt to squeeze a nipple and slide the other down into my wetness. Warm, delicious waves roll over me as I stroke myself. Inserting a finger, I swirl my thumb over my clit. I imagine it's the beautiful Scot pushing my thighs apart, holding me down, plunging a tongue into my folds.

"Kellan," I gasp into the darkness.

It's not enough. *I need more.*

It takes a while to find my dildo packed away in one of my bags. I didn't think when I packed it if I would even get to use it sharing a room with my sister, I just tossed it in.

I get back under the covers with it, praying to some divine power no one comes in while I'm using it. Once I'm slick again, I turn over, so my face is stuffed into my pillow and raise my hips. Then I tease my entrance with it. It's not hard to imagine Kellan is behind me, pushing the end of his cock between my legs. When I finally ram it in, it's Kellan holding my head down so I can't breathe and driving into me as hard as he can.

The feel of the dildo moving in and out, my nipples rubbing on the bed, has my whole body vibrating with pleasure. *"That's it, baby girl, take all of me,"* I almost hear him saying. The made-up Kellan holds me down, fucks me relentlessly from behind until I'm screaming into the pillow, biting down on it with my teeth.

I orgasm hard, clenching around the toy inside me. My skin is slick with sweat and every muscle is jelly. The need hasn't gone away, though. It's still there, demanding more.

But I'm exhausted and spent. I wash the toy in the sink, put it away, and then climb back into bed. I'm just drifting off into blissful oblivion when I remember Pía wanted me to leave a window open. Annoyed to be awake again, I crawl off my bed and onto hers and spend a good few minutes trying to yank the frame open. It's so stiff.

I get the rickety thing open. Frigid air assaults me, but I embrace it. I don't see my sister outside, but it's dark, and no doubt she'll have moved things on with Kellan by now. At least one thing hasn't changed. My sister always gets her guy.

At the end of the garden, close to the forest, is a shadowy figure. Dread pierces my gut, and a chill invades my entire body. I blink a few times, no longer breathing, trying to reconcile the form I'm seeing. Horns like antlers. A skull for a face. Twisted vines for arms and legs. The freakiest thing is that it looks like it's staring up at me.

Quickly, I yank the window closed and scrabble back into my bed, hauling the bedcovers over my head like I used to as a child. Breathing hard, heart thudding like the clappers, I squeeze my eyes shut. It must be a dream. I'm dreaming.

Because if I'm not...

What the fuck was that?

CHAPTER FOUR

Riona

Birds screech. Shapes come out of the forest, surrounding me, darkening the ground. One shadow undulates and forms the figure of an upright beast. Parts are darkness. The rest is leaves and twisted branches. Stag horns adorn its head. Misshapen claws form its hands. I can't see its face, but its eyes are glowing, making it terrifying.

I'm lying prone on a mossy rock surrounded by a circle of smaller ones. There are vines wrapped around my limbs, over my mouth, holding me in place. I can't move. I've no clue how I got here. There's no way out.

The monster moves like a man, striding toward me. Tears mist my vision. I give a strangled, muffled cry against my restraints. *No, please.* It stops inside the circle. Burnished eyes, bright with fire, stare down at me.

"Fear brings them closer," it says in a gravelly voice. "As does suffering and pain."

Either the shock of hearing it speak or the surreal nature of being held down by plants has my cries subsiding. All I can do is stare.

This isn't happening. This can't be happening.

It's a dream. It has to be.

The beast breaks its gaze away, glancing the way it came. "They're coming. Think happy thoughts if you want to live."

Happy thoughts? You've got to be kidding me.

I'm unsure what the creature means until the birds flock into the air surrounding us. A vicious wind screams into the clearing with them. The sound is shrill and ear-splitting. The birds swoop down at me, beaks and talons ripping into my bare arms and legs. I can't shield my face, so I shut my eyes and turn my head. One of them slices open my cheek, making me cry out.

"Your pain is attracting them," the beast growls, his voice loud in my head.

Think happy thoughts.

My dog, Mr. Whippy, comes to mind with his big brown eyes and soft, floppy ears. I focus on the unconditional love he gives me, the way he puts his head on my lap when I'm down. If anyone loves me, Mr. Whippy does.

It works.

Almost at once, the wind fades and the birds disintegrate into feathers. There's nothing left but the monster...

And me.

It smiles, tilting its head to the side. Or at least I think that's a grin. "Good girl," it rumbles.

I blink, seeing the creature more clearly—an immense beast with the face of death but the torso of a man. Vines cover his limbs and merge with his flesh, exposing sinew and wildflowers among the branches of his bones. Thorns for teeth menace from within the depths of its shadowed skull-like face.

This is some fucked up dream.

"It's interesting," it says, coming closer, looking down at me. "Humans really value their pets." Its fiery eyes are mocking as it speaks. "Your fear has eased much."

He's right. I'm less afraid now that the birds have gone. I'm calmer, distanced from what's

happening, as though I'm watching it from outside of my body. *Because it's only a nightmare. This isn't real.*

I went to bed.

And monsters don't emerge out of the woods.

It laughs—a deep chuckle that courses through my entire body. “You don't think I'm real. How very whimsical.” It snorts, breathing out hot air. It moves itself to crouch over me and the boulder I'm roped onto. I pull feebly against the vines, a whimper escaping me.

Maybe I'm not so brave.

“Am I real enough for you now?” He bends down over me until the skull and toothy grin are intimately close. I give a frantic nod as it places its clawed, thorny hands on my bare thighs. A jolt of energy sparks between us where it touches me. My legs, slightly parted because of the way the vines have me pinned, tremble as the contact continues to send tingles up and down every nerve in my body.

I try to speak, but the branch in my mouth makes it impossible to talk. All I can taste is dirt and soil, and the acidity of my terror making me choke. It makes a motion with its hand and the gag uncoils, slowly, allowing me to swallow.

“What are you?” I ask in a ragged voice, moistening my lips.

It chuckles again. The rumble of its voice is like a caress over my entire body, pulling at my center. He drags his talons farther up my legs, adding to the sensation. They don't break the skin. Not like the birds. The sharp points send shivers through me like nothing before. And as it draws in a breath, the tendrils holding me move and writhe too like they're part of him, like they're very much alive.

Held like this, unable to move, it's horrifying...

And exciting at the same time.

Did I just think that?

“You're conflicted. Interesting,” he says. It's definitely male. I only have to lower my eye-line to see the enormous member between his legs, erect and covered in thorns.

I'm suddenly aware of how exposed I am. I'm wearing my favorite band t-shirt I went to bed in and not much else. “What do you want?” The words tear out of my throat as I jerk my gaze away.

“All I want is what is owed, Caitriona,” he sneers, flicking out a long, thin tongue between his jaws. The monster's eyes dim, and its grin deepens. “And to give you what you desire.”

The monster shoves my legs wider, and the vines tighten and pull taut, keeping them there.

“I desire nothing,” I say, almost breathless now.

“Lies,” it says. “You pleased yourself to thoughts of me.”

Heat flames my cheeks. I took my panties off to fantasize about Kellan. It was Kellan, not this demon.

My body jerks as the whip-like appendage lashes at the insides of my thighs.

No, No, No.

But I say nothing as his hot, wet tongue sears the rising heat between my legs. It teases my entrance, wrapping around the bud of my clit. The silent protest in my head dissolves away. I close my eyes and squirm in place, panting as the monster bends down to eat me out.

This is just a nightmare. A dark, twisted, fucked up one.

But the pleasure spiking through me says otherwise.

Every lick, every intrusion, has me wild with desire. Quite the opposite feeling to his razor-sharp

appendages digging into my thighs. The spiky vines holding me down prick and pulsate too, slicing and caressing me in their embrace. Some of them have little suction cups which hook onto the uncovered parts of my body that they're twisted around. In the same rhythm as the monster's prehensile tongue, they suckle and stroke. I'm shaking and shivering with the intensity of it.

I never, *never* had this with Connor.

"His human tongue could never compare," my captor chuckles, his breath scalding my intimate parts between laps. I'm dripping with need. I can feel it coating my entrance and inner thighs. Not all of it is monster saliva.

Fuck. I'm really getting off on this.

Shame burns inside of me. I try to close my legs, but the vines aren't allowing it.

He laughs at my attempt and runs a clawed digit through my slick, wet folds. "So, so desperate for me, aren't you, little one?"

"I'm not—" He plunges his talons deep inside me, making me cry out and arch my back. The sensation of him sliding inside, almost slashing me to ribbons with his nails, burns me from the inside out.

"Do you not want this?" he asks. "Are you not hungry for my attention?"

I gnaw my lower lip, shaking my head.

"Say you are," he croons.

"No. I can't." But my body betrays my words. In his grip, I writhe and moan.

"You don't have to." He growls out a snicker as he fucks me with his monstrous fingers, making my hips rock and my back arch. "You're primed for me, Caitriona, perfectly made for me."

Just as I'm nearing the peak, he rips his hand away. He crawls over me until his face and body are above mine. He's heavy—hard where bark entwines with the beast and soft where fur covers the rest of him. As he grins, looking down at me, baring row upon row of dagger-like teeth, the weight of his massive cock rests between my legs. It's rigidly hard, and where the spines are along the base they spear the tender parts as he shifts above me.

"Say it again," he says as he lowers his face to mine, running a claw through my hair. "Deny me, Daughter of Scots." I breathe in the scent of pine and earth. The wide tip of his phallus pushes against my entrance but doesn't go any further inside. Restrained as I am, I wiggle beneath him, eager for him, yet absolutely petrified at the same time.

He's going to fuck me or kiss me.

Either way....

He's too big, too jagged.

He's going to rip me to shreds.

"No," I say again, louder. It still comes out as a whisper. "This isn't what I want."

He gives a harsh laugh and snatches my hair, jerking my head back. His long tongue snakes out to lick the tears that have fallen. "Your heart says differently. I can taste your desire from here. You want to be consumed. Your body begs for it."

"It was Kellan I wanted," I croak out.

"Was it not you who pleaded to be kissed, caressed, and fucked by someone other than your pathetic human lover?"

Fuck. I can't deny that. "Yes," I say. "But I didn't mean..." I'd be lying if I reasoned an excuse. I don't have one. "I meant a human, someone."

He chuckles. “Oh, sweet Caitriona. Let me show you how no human man can compare.”

The thick vines swathed around his limbs unravel, becoming tentacle-like, endowed with suction cups along the edges of their prehensile tips. He shifts his weight, allowing them access to me, amused at my struggles to get away. They glide over my body against my will, nudging, probing, and then slipping under my t-shirt.

“No, not there.” I toss my head. The vines are suddenly everywhere, pleasuring every nerve ending they come across under my clothes. Every time they latch on—over my nipples, around my neck, and between my thighs—their suction makes me gasp and twist.

“I’m merely fulfilling your wish,” the monster sneers. “I’m caressing you.”

I give a sob as sparks of ecstasy shiver through me. And mortification sweeps me from head to toe, even as I curl them. I’ve never felt anything this raw and intense. It’s left me desperate for release. My inner thighs are dripping with my own need and the vine-like parts of the beast seem to enjoy rubbing it all over my body.

“And now I’m going to fuck you in the manner you crave,” he growls.

I open my eyes wide at that. “Please—” is all I manage. All I can think of is how I fucked myself with the dildo. To be held down and used like that. *It wasn’t enough before.*

The monster grins as though seeing my shameful thoughts. “It’ll be enough after I’m done with you.”

His tentacles retract as his other clawed hand comes up. It shreds through the front of my t-shirt and the thin plant-like vines holding me like butter. I cry out, trembling as the breeze hits my bare skin, causing my nipples to perk and goosebumps to pebble over every inch of me. My bonds are gone.

He towers over, teeth exposed into a demonic smile. “Now run.”

Without thinking, I scramble to my feet. I make it off the rock, but no farther. His vines are too quick. They whip around my ankle, yanking me back, dragging me to him through the dirt. As soon as he’s upon me, his clawed hands snake around my neck, pushing my face down into the soil. Tentacled vines coil around my waist, pulling so my hips are up in the air.

Ready for him.

I’m soaked. Quivering. Every part of me is desperate to have him inside me. As if in answer to my prayers, one of his tentacles slithers between my legs, latching onto my clit with powerful suckers. It plunges inside without mercy. *I’m going to be ripped apart.* Instead, his prehensile limb penetrates me deep. I moan and writhe in his grip, but the monster keeps me locked in place until I can’t take anymore. *I’m going to come.*

“Ah, ah, not yet,” the monster teases.

Now I beg. “Please, I need it.”

“What do you want, sweet lass?”

“I want you inside me,” I breathe into the ground.

He gives a deep chuckle, taking his hand away from my neck to grab both my hips. “So eager for my cock, little mortal.”

I moan in response as the pointed tip of his cock, hot and pulsing, lines up with my entrance. I don’t think about his enormous girth. *It’s a dream, so physical constraints probably don’t matter here, right?*

Before I can even ask, the question is answered for me.

There's a stretching sensation as the end of his cock expands and something long and thin probes my drenched folds. It reminds me of the monster's lash-like tongue. It enters me, making me gasp as the thinnest part spears my insides. Pain mixed with pleasure engulfs my entire body.

"What was that?" I ask.

"Just a little something to help you take all of me." His talons slice into my sides, pulling my now languid hips up further. "My venom hasn't taken away your ability to feel. It just loosens your muscles up."

As my lower half relaxes, a warmth spreading from within, he forces himself into me. He does it slowly, stretching me to the absolute fullest. I groan as he drags me back onto him. The pleasure is intense now. As he grinds his hips, the thick barbs at the base of his cock jab between my ass cheeks. *So that's what they're for.*

Even with the venom, I am at my limit. Any wider and I will break.

He pauses, leaving me panting, clutching at handfuls of grass.

"You've stopped? Why?" I ask with a moan, twisting to look up at him.

"Because I want you closer," he hisses in the moonlight.

His tentacles tighten and lift my upper body from the ground. They cocoon around me until I'm leaning back onto his chest, still impaled on his cock. As he winds a claw through my hair, he gives a deep rumbling growl. And then rams hard, sinking in so deep.

The monster fucks me savagely. I moan and clench around him, held in a thorny prison of extreme pleasure. Every sense is heightened. Every nerve overstimulated. This is nothing like I fantasized. It's beyond compare. At this angle, the barbs on his cock slide easily into my back entrance with every stroke. His tentacle-like vines explore and move with him, one on each breast and another on my clit.

"You're trembling," he says into my ear. He's right. I am. I'm shaking all over. If he wasn't holding me up, I would no doubt fall into a heap on the floor. The orgasm has been building to where I can't take it anymore.

The beast slams into me one last time. He groans and tenses before exploding deep within me. His seed is hot and carnal. The sensation of it filling me up urges me toward my own orgasm. Then the ecstasy takes over, racking my body, sending me into blissful oblivion. I scream louder than the raging wind. And all the birds in the trees disperse.

"Enjoy that, little mortal?" he says with a low rumble, as he dismounts.

I nod, breathless and boneless, as he wraps his arms around me. I look up at my dark savior of sorts. His amber eyes seem to glow brighter, more like the full moon behind him.

He gives me an evil-looking smile. "Good. Then when I come for you, you'll be willing."

I frown at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"If it's not you, then it'll be another of your kin."

"Another? Who?"

He doesn't answer. Dropping me unceremoniously onto the grass, he stalks away.

Leaving me cold and alone.

But not for long. The earth moves, or should I say, the vines springing from the ground do. They slide over me, tightening, coiling, pulling me down. Leaves and vines smother over my legs, arms, and torso, all the way to my face. I can't move or breathe. They're unyielding no matter how hard I flail and fight.

The nightmare has turned into the worst fear of mine.

They're burying me alive... is my final thought, as the last few vines strangle and choke me, taking me under.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ríona

I wake up on my bed in the dark. I'm freezing cold.

Icy air blows over me, making me wrench to a sitting position, hugging myself. The last thing I remember is being buried.

By a monster.

A dream. That was just a bad dream.

Despite it being a nightmare, my mouth tastes like dirt. I lean over to take a drink of water, ridding my tongue of the foulness cloying at the back of my throat. I end up scanning my body for cuts and bruises and then feel like an idiot when there are none. Of course there aren't. A noise in the room startles me, but relief floods through my veins when I see the outline of Pía in the bed next to me.

It was just a terrible dream.

The room is dark. Though, I can see that the window is wide open.

How did that happen?

I get up to close it, and then lie down and try to sleep. It evades me. My mind won't stop replaying it over and over. Why dream of such a thing? Is there something wrong with me? I reach down between my legs. I'm soaking and still horny, but I refuse to rub one out. That's what got me into trouble before.

The birds sing as sleep pulls me under. Troubling thoughts swirl around my head as I drift off for the third time.

Was it a nightmare or a fantasy? It must be a reaction to Connor dumping me. Subconsciously, I must think of Connor as a monster. The branches holding me down as the relationship that took away my freedom. *Yes, that's it. Oh, God. What a mess. I'm probably going crazy. A therapist would have a field day with me.*

Morning comes and with it is a hazy memory of the night before. It was just a night terror. I used to have them all the time when I was younger. Still, I can't shake the feeling of being watched. Usually, I'd confide in Pía about whatever is freaking me out, but her bed is empty. She was in bed when I woke up earlier. I swear there was an outline of her passed out under her duvet. *Strange.* Guilt gnaws at me about the window. I can't remember if I closed it or opened it. It's closed now, so I check my phone. Sure enough, there's a message from Pía saying she's gone for a run. She must have got up early. I don't remember my sister being a morning person. I guess people can change?

I go about getting up and dressed, closing the curtains before the latter. After I brush my teeth in the adjoining bathroom, I notice a scratch on my cheek when I check my presentation in the mirror. Frowning, I move closer to the glass to get a better view. It's not deep. A flashback of when the birds dove for my face has my heart beating fast. In the cold light of day, it puts me on edge. I must have done it in my sleep. Sighing, I make a note to find a first aid kit.

I'd rather not have a scar.

After breakfast, I volunteer to run errands for Cora. I want to dust off the creepy vibe from my dream. And Pía is off out somewhere. I should be too.

The local farm shop isn't far. Aunt Cora already phoned ahead with the order. I'm just driving there to pick it up. I turn all my energy to driving Cora's manual car on roads that shouldn't be roads. Haven't they heard of tarmac? Still, it's a lovely day. Birds sing and sunlight dances through the boughs and between branches as I roar down the dirt tracks. Even in the off-season, this place is a fairy-tale. Getting out of the house was just what I needed. The memory of the shadowy figure last night is fading fast, especially when I drive over a bridge that hides a breath-taking display of nature.

I yank the wheel and park up. I'm out of the car, picking my way through the long grass to the bridge. When I get there, the rushing sound makes my heart sing. I can't help but smile when I see it—a huge waterfall cascading down a rocky cliff. All at once, I feel so small and that all of my problems are insignificant. *Fucking hell.* This is worth getting up and out so early.

Maybe I could stay with Cora?

My brow furrows at that thought as soon as it enters my head. Cora said we could stay for as long as we like. However, I promised Pía we'd leave as soon as the funeral was over. I also don't know Aunt Cora well. She and my mother had a falling out when they were young. They didn't speak a word for a long time. But Cora is nice. If a little hippyish. The first thing she did when I arrived was read my tarot cards. She gave me one to keep—the Devil torturing some poor souls in purgatory. The thing gave me the creeps, so I put it face down in the drawer beside my bed.

Strange to be thinking about that card now, but it causes a shiver to run down my spine. The demon in it reminds me of the monster from last night. Just like that, I'm uneasy again.

I hurry back to the car. Then I drive all the way to the farm shop with the radio blasting out.

Staying here isn't an option. I should start looking at trains back to London. If I have to move out of that flat soon, it doesn't leave long for me to pack and organize somewhere to stay. *Where would I go? Ma's?* Immediately, I reject the idea. Ma brings out the worst in me. It wouldn't be long before we're arguing and killing each other.

After I collect the groceries, I exit the local farm shop laden with bags and hobble down the small country lane to where my car is parked.

"Do you need a hand?" asks a gruff voice.

I glance up to see Kellan walking beside me and almost drop my bags. In the daylight, he's gorgeous. No man should be that hot. Dark tousled hair. Forest green eyes that draw me in. He even has a dimple on his chin. "That's a lot of shopping," he adds with a smirk.

"I...er," I stammer.

He doesn't wait for an answer. He takes everything I'm carrying, the same electric current from last night zapping up my hand as his skin brushes mine. I bite my lower lip. *What the hell was that?*

"You don't have to do this," I say, my face hot as Kellan walks with me toward the car.

"It's my pleasure, Caitriona." A thrill runs up my spine at him, remembering my full name. I give him an awkward smile. *Fucking hell. Why am I grinning like an idiot?*

I babble, talking about how I hate driving a manual, but I managed it, and how pretty the waterfall is. He follows me over to where Cora's car is and waits while I open it. Then he hefts the bags into the trunk and closes it shut.

I stand there like an idiot, giving him a wry smile. *Well, this is awkward.*

His eyes are full of amusement. "If you like waterfalls, there's one I'd like to—"

"So, you and my sister, huh?" I throw at him. My smile tightens into a wince. *Ground swallow me up right now. Did I really just ask him if he's knobbing my sister?*

“Ah.” His eyes gleam, matching the surrounding trees. They’re so green. “Your sister was fun.” He cocks his head.

“Yes, she is,” I say. My cheeks burn. I did not expect him to admit it, but there you go. All the gorgeous men are dicks.

“But I prefer you.” He winks, making the blush deepen. Then he reaches out and takes my hand, stroking the palm, sending mixed signals to every nerve in my body. There’s a buzz between us every time we touch. I love it and hate it at the same time. It reminds me of the demon that invaded my dreams.

“Thanks for the help,” I say, letting out a breath as I extract my hand from the gorgeous Scot.

I like Kellan, but I’m clearly on the rebound, and can’t ignore that he kept my sister out until the early hours of this morning. The part of me that was grateful to have a hot guy interested in me after being dumped, crumples down and dies right there in the parking lot. I suck in a breath, mentally shaking my head.

“Are you sure I can’t change your mind? There’s an ancient stone circle I’d love to show you around here.”

I give my head a shake. “I must get back. The food will ruin.” Before he can stop me, before the stupid, desperate part of me can cause more trouble, I get into Aunt Cora’s car and drive away.

You are not fifteen anymore, you’re a full-grown woman.

Crushes are a waste of time. Especially with my shitshow of a relationship at an end. I need to find somewhere to live before I’m homeless on top of everything else.

“Have you seen Pía?” Cora asks me as soon as she enters the kitchen.

“Is she not back from her run yet?” I ask, finishing up putting the food and household items away. I guessed where most of it went. Anything to keep my mind occupied.

“I haven’t seen her since last night,” Cora says, opening one cupboard to move the items around to a different one. *Okay, some of my guesses were wrong, but it’s the thought that counts.*

I frown as I slide onto a stool at the kitchen table, getting my laptop out of my bag. “I saw her in bed last night. Could she have come back, and you didn’t hear her?”

“She’s not in the bedroom. I checked earlier when I went upstairs with a cup of tea for Nell,” Cora says, concern scrunching up her face.

“Don’t worry about Pía,” I say, typing the website address for buying train tickets into the search bar. “She’s probably still out running, or gone to the pub,” I add. More likely, she wanted to stay far away from Ma as possible. My sister and mother do not get along.

Aunt Cora’s frown deepens. “It’s eleven o’clock in the morning.”

“She’ll be fine,” I say in a breezy tone. “I’ll send her a message.” I take out my phone and send my sister a text asking her to come back to the house. If we’re traveling together, she’ll need to tell me what train times work for her.

There’s another message from Connor asking, no, demanding, I call him asap. Just seeing his name in black and white has me red-faced and flustered. I welcome the mild rage, but the tears prickling at the backs of my eyes are exasperating. I force them back, sniffing quietly. While Aunt Cora’s turned away, I take a second to wipe my face with my sleeve. When will I get over him? *Not soon enough,*

obviously. It's been like this for days—one minute I'm fine, the next I'm a pitiful mess.

Still looking at my phone, I can't help but see the latest notifications. @connorjhughes has posted recently on his Instagram. Without thinking, I click on the pop-up and I'm floored by the picture of Connor with a stunning girl at a restaurant. No wonder he demanded I call him.

I place my phone facing down so I don't have to see it anymore. Every time I do, my heart bottoms out of my chest. I don't need that right now. Connor is a dick, and that won't change.

"Why don't you go for a walk?" Cora says gently. I glance up, the mask of concern on her face now directed at me. "You seem a little upset."

"I'm not..." I stare at my laptop screen, vision misting over so I can't see the screen properly.

"Your eyes are a little glassy," Cora says. She sighs and sits down in front of me. "Is it boy trouble?"

I shoot my eyes heavenward out of habit, but inside I'm failing fast. If she pushes any more, I'll break.

"Sure, a walk before lunch might be nice," I say, forcing a smile. I get up from the table and walk to the door.

"Don't go into the woods," Cora reminds me. "And don't be too long. It looks like it might rain."

I acknowledge her words with a tilt of my head, but I'm not really listening. I'm too busy reaching for my phone to scroll through Instagram one last time.

CHAPTER SIX

Riona

Don't go into the woods.

The land beyond the house belongs to someone else. Aunt Cora was adamant about that when we first arrived.

"You're free to stay as long as you like," Aunt Cora says as she shows me and Pía to our room. It's floral, quaint, and tiny, and there's no bathroom. My gaze trails over the comforting bedroom, ultimately drawn to the sweeping view of the Scottish woodlands out the window.

It hasn't changed since I stayed here last. My sister scoffs as she stalks in and dumps her bag on the bed nearest the window. The only double bed in the room. I sigh and take the single next to the wall. As I put my things down, I turn my attention to Aunt Cora.

"Just don't go into the woods," she adds.

"We won't, Auntie," I say.

"Good. They're haunted," she replies, making her mouth a flat line.

"Ghosts." Pía snorts. "We're not kids," she says as she lounges on the comforter, taking her phone out.

"Pía, shoes!" I hiss at her, trying not to let the thought of sleeping in a single bed reduce me to a sniveling mess. I'd probably cry in the double as well. Once, Connor stayed here with me. We visited during my gap year after we got back from traveling around Europe together. It was only two nights, but we shared this room.

And that bed.

"You don't have to believe. Ghosts don't need you to," Cora says, eyeing my sister as she kicks off her Pumas, making toward the door.

"Maybe if I meet one, I'll ask to see my dad," Pía throws out.

Cora turns and frowns. "The Fair Ones don't negotiate. They only take."

I grimace. "We don't believe in Scottish fairies either."

Cora's gaze burns a hole in my head as she stares. Eventually, she lets out a sigh and answers. "Then believe in men with guns. Garrett doesn't take kindly to anyone trespassing in his woods."

"Is Garrett hot?" Pía asks after Cora leaves and it's just the two of us. Cora's car rumbles as it pulls out of the driveway. Ma is still at the funeral home. Cora is probably off to pick her up.

"No, no one is hot here," I say quickly. Best to get it out of my sister's head that there's anyone here worth her time. That's the last thing I need—hunting Pía down every evening. I did it throughout school and sixth form college. I draw the line at doing it in Scotland.

Pía rolls her eyes at me and shakes her head, unimpressed. I turn away from her to unpack. I hear her sigh and shift on the bed.

"This place is fucking creepy as hell," she says.

I look over at my sister between hanging the one black dress I own and closing the closet door. She's leaning on the windowsill, looking out over the rugged Scottish hills. The sky has darkened to a shade out of a horror film. And it's begun to rain.

"It's only for a couple of weeks," I say to her.

"That might be fine for you. I have a life, you know, that I'm missing out on," she says.

"So do I," I grit out.

Pia shoots me a dark look over her shoulder. "Connor isn't a life. He's a fucking nightmare."

"Connor is..." The words choke in my throat. I want to tell my sister what happened, but something stops me.

She shakes her head and looks back out the window. "Two weeks and then we're leaving. Don't pander to her, Rí, I mean it."

Her. She means Ma.

"We're not here for Ma. We're here for Auntie Cora."

"Pfft, that witch. Shriveled from the waist down, that one. Don't you think it's odd she never got married and just stayed in this house with Uncle Danny for her whole fucking life?"

I let out a sigh. "No, I don't. I'm sure she had her reasons."

"Reasons like incest?" Pia smirks.

"Really, Pia?" I exclaim as I carry on putting my things away.

My sister laughs and goes back to her phone as a flurry of messages comes through. "Finally, some fucking signal."

I'm annoyed that I have to be here, but grateful for the distraction at the same time. If I was at home, I'd probably be packing to leave.

Just think of this as a break.

A relaxing break.

I would do if it weren't for Ma ordering me about left and right, and my sister being difficult all the time. I *need* to get lost in these woods. I don't care if I get caught trespassing, that Crazy Garrett will shoot me full of holes. I met him at the funeral. He's only slightly unhinged. I seriously doubt he's stalking the area with a shotgun.

And if these woods are haunted by fairies? Bring it. I'm not a kid anymore. Bogeymen and witches don't scare me. Not like they used to when I'd beg the babysitter to read us an old book of fairy stories. The one from Ma's forbidden bookshelf—dark, twisted tales that didn't have a happy ending.

What about monsters? Unease prickles at the back of my neck. I brush it away. Monsters aren't real. And the dream from last night wasn't in the forest. It was in some field with several huge standing stones in it. Not a tree in sight, unless you count the vines. No, this place with its conifers and oaks is comforting. It reminds me of a poem Ma has earmarked in book of poetry on her forbidden shelf...how does it go?

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep...

And these woods are *very* lovely, *very* dark, and *very* deep.

A contented sigh leaves my lips. Cora was right—a walk is doing me good. My phone is away now. And with every step I take on the footpath, shadowed by magnificent pines, the mess inside my head becomes meaningless. Even the silence is golden. Only rustling leaves whisper in my ear as I go along. After weeks of wearing a mask, having to be the perfect daughter, I'm alone.

Alone. If only it could be forever.

It might be. I'm kind of lost, but I don't mind. It's magical now I can no longer see the road—the

way the light shivers through the branches, making patterns on my face. The way they dance and flicker. In combination with the earthy smells—moss, mildew, and decay—assaulting my nose, it's revitalizing. I let out a full breath. Then drag in another, filling my lungs with the woods, leaving behind all the shit I have to deal with.

In a dark corner of my brain, there's a nagging voice telling me to go back. I ignore it. In some ways, I'm just like Pía. I don't always do the right thing. Sometimes I make risky choices. I'm not the virtuous sister. Only when I'm compared to her am I seen as the more sensible one, the older sibling who has to look after everyone, Ma included.

Despite the sun being out, there's a chill beginning to invade my bones. Shaking my head, I storm forward, increasing the pace. I should have brought a jacket. Before I left, I stopped in the downstairs loo where the coats are kept. Mine wasn't there. Pía must still have it. That's fine. She can keep it. Connor bought it for me. I want nothing to do with him anymore.

Maybe I'll find that Kellan guy. Have some of that fun I keep hearing about.

I laugh out loud at that. The mad sound echoes through the trees. Who am I kidding? I can barely keep myself from crying. What if I had a breakdown during sex?

You didn't with the beast...

Because that wasn't real.

Absently, I reach up and touch the scratch on my cheek.

Was it?

A bitter wind chooses at that moment to blow right through me. I massage my arms over my cardigan, shaking now. It's like the woods are rejecting me. *I should have brought a coat. Any bloody coat.* Lost in my own misery, my phone vibrates. It could be Pía. I pull it out to see a missed call from Connor flash on the screen. And a voice message notification.

Gnawing at the inside of my mouth, I access my messages.

"Ri, I wanted to tell you in person, but you left in a hurry. I'm going to have to do it over the phone," Connor's smooth voice chides like I've caused him a lot of trouble. He sighs, pausing for a few seconds that I think he's hung up, until he carries on with, "I've met someone—"

I disconnect.

A dull, throbbing pain lances through my chest where my heart is, squeezing it like an unsympathetic fist until it lodges in my throat. Tears well up in my eyes. I come to a halt, leaning against the rough bark of a tree, gasping as I close them. As the cool moss soothes my head and the earthy scents pacify my brain, I want to crawl into a hole in the ground. I want to let the grass grow over me until I'm gone. But it's not that easy.

"Why not?" a silent scream demands inside my head.

Because you have promises to keep.

My soul wrenches, making me heave, making me wail like a banshee. Now I've started, I'm crying so hard, I can't stop. *Where is it all coming from?* I've gotten used to shoving it all back. Now it's free and running amok in my body, it won't abate.

It's as though I've finally let go.

God, Ríona, get a grip.

When I finally manage to get one, I'm no longer cold. I'm hot and shivery and breathing hard. I'm also on the floor, sitting among the leaves with my phone in front of me. Overhead, a bird caws reminding me of the swarm of ravens or whatever that was at the funeral.

Reluctantly, I get to my feet and dust off the stray leaves and twigs. There's an eerie atmosphere in the clearing now. Gone is the happy sunlight that bounced off the trees. The joyful breeze that made the flowers dance is now a howling gale. And it's getting dark. Fast.

My body has stopped shaking. The tears have dried up too. Good. Crying doesn't help anyone. Sniffing loudly, I breathe in and out, trying to get a hold of myself. I bet my eyes are all puffy and red now. I blink rapidly and resist the urge to rub at them.

My phone rings, scaring the shit out of me.

"Ríona, is your sister with you?" It's Ma. She sounds tired.

"No, I'm out for a walk. She hasn't come home yet?" I ask.

"No, she hasn't. She's not answering her phone either."

"It's still—" I glance at my watch. I was about to say it's early, but it's gone half-past four. It's been five hours since I left the house. *Have I really been out that long?* I sigh and get to my feet. "You know what Pía's like," I say instead.

"Just tell her to call her mother before I send a search party out."

"I'm sure she's fine," I say. "I'll call her now."

I hang up before Ma can berate me for not keeping track of her. Then I press the shortcut for Pía on speed-dial. It rings...just as her ringtone echoes through the woods.

Pía's phone is here.

What the fuck?

Chest pounding, I hang up. "Pía!"

Silence.

I must be hearing things. Hands shaking, I dial my sister again. This time, I stay on the line. I wait until I hear the familiar melody of Taylor Swift's 'Bad Blood' and then walk to where it's coming from.

It's the one song Pía uses solely for my calls. She thought it would piss me off and she was right. I hate it because it reminds me of the time when I chose Connor over her. But now, I cling to it like a lifeline.

Every time it goes to voicemail, I call again. I keep on doing that until I'm standing over a pile of mud and dead leaves.

Pink.

Her phone is pink.

Trembling, throat thick with fear, I bend down to scoop up the brightly colored mobile phone stuck in the dirt. It's vibrating at me, with Taylor screaming out at the top of her lungs to *look at what I've done.*

The phone is cold to touch, as though it's been out here for hours and hours. *What if she dropped it while she was hurt? What if she's lying on the ground somewhere unconscious?* I spin around, scanning the forest for my sister. "Pía!"

Leaves and branches rustle behind me. I turn to the noise, but there's nothing there. *What the fuck?* I'm jumping at shadows now.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

A twig snaps and birds flurry and scatter in the air.

"Who's there? Pía? Is that you?"

Silence.

Then I see *it*—the shadowy figure from my nightmares. It's standing at the edge of the clearing.

I freeze in place, heart racing, mouth suddenly dry. Until it gives a harsh laugh, making my breath catch and my whole body recoil in response. Then I'm bolting back down the overgrown pathway as fast as I can.

Oh, my God. It's the monster. What the fuck is it doing out of my dream?

Birds caw overhead. Trees whisper. Branches tangle in my hair and scratch at my clothes as the forest seems to close in around me. I don't know where I'm going. I can't think coherent thoughts. Only that I need to get as far away from that thing as possible.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I love it when they run.

Her fear is so sharp, I can taste it in the wind. It makes me laugh. How could I not? She's mine. She just doesn't know it yet. Her misery is like a drug to me, her silent hopelessness drawing me in. Vibrant, glowing, hair like the bright red leaves in fall. Eyes like a stormy sky with the crushing weight of sadness floating inside them. I can practically devour her essence just by looking at her.

And I will...

Devour her.

They promised me the broken-hearted, the weary, the lost...

She came here to weep and let nature soothe her tears, ease her pain. I can take that pain away. I can take away her suffering.

She's mine.

All fucking mine.

I laugh because of all the daughters to cross my path, of all the lassies to grace my woods—it's *her*. Delivered to me like a gift from my brethren. Years ago, I tasted one of her kin. Briefly, I caught her in my woods. She wasn't heartbroken, but just as lost. Not as divine to me, but still a delicious morsel. She wasn't afraid, though. In fact, she was wily and interesting. She came with a purpose. She wanted my magic. After the deal was made and broken, she never came back. She sent her children away....well, one of them anyway. The other secluded herself in that house, taunting me like the little bitch she is.

But now...

There's a new hunt to be had.

She runs fast and free like the horde is chasing her. It is. I laugh to myself because she can't escape. The forest belongs to me. This is my realm. She can't get very far. It's dark now. The shadows provide me with passage to man-made places.

Just when she thinks she's safe.

I'll drag her back to me.

A deal is a deal, after all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Riona

The sound of flapping wings. Something snatches at my ankle.
I fall flat on my face.

As I hit the floor—slamming my chin on a fallen branch, scraping my knee on a rock—air whooshes out of my chest. I can't breathe for a second. Then I can. I use my lungs to scream as I scurry in the dirt and leaves to get up. Strangely, there's no pain. My leg is numb. My face aches but the pain's distant. I get to my feet and stumble into another run.

I don't get far.

A cold, rough hand snakes around my ankle, yanking me back down again. I turn over, scrabbling backward, fear choking up my insides when I see it's not a hand wrapped around me but a thorny vine. I scream a second time, trying to rip my leg away as the monster strides over the undergrowth toward me.

"Caitriona," he growls. I jerk my head up, heart pounding in my chest. I see it in broad daylight—the monster from my dream. It towers over me, grinning, puffing hot air out of his nostrils. "I told you there would be time to play."

"Get away from me," I yell into the wind.

He pulls back slightly. "You've made your choice, then? Should I take what's mine from another? Cassiopeia?"

Pía. He has Pía. A rush of anger sweeps through me. I grab the nearest thing I can find. A rock.

I hold it aloft, glaring at the creature that surely has her. "What have you done with my sister?"

Its burnished eyes glow brighter. "You gave your names, your true names, so now you belong to me."

"What do you mean, we belong to you? Where is Pía?"

"Safe." He chuckles, baring his pointed teeth. "Until you make your choice. A deal is a deal. She promised one of you to me. I've come to collect."

I tense at the last part. "Who promised you?"

The monster grins, cocking his head. "Your kin did before you were born. You know her as Pearl."

"Wh...what?" My breath chokes in my throat. He means Granny. Her full name was Margaret, but everyone knew her as 'Pearl'.

I shake my head, closing my eyes briefly. "This can't be happening," I mumble.

"I'd prefer it to be you," the monster says, his deep voice sounding a little more human, bringing me back to reality.

I drag my eyes open, no longer wet with tears. There aren't any left inside me. I've cried a fucking river and more. I steel myself to glance at the beast, but it's no longer a monster but a man.

Kellan.

And he's starkers naked.

My eyes widen and a blush assaults my whole body.

"This might make it easier. I think you prefer this form, no?" he smirks, running a hand through his hair. His eyes are still burnished amber, reminding me he's not human. He just looks like he is.

"You're the monster?"

His brow furrows as he snorts and shakes his head. "I prefer the term Fair Folk or Good People."

“Where is Pía?”

“Cassiopeia is safe,” he says, eyes darker now, fading from their amber to a soft green.

“Why do you keep saying her name like that?” No one calls my sister Cassiopeia, only our father used to.

“Because it’s how I keep her close,” he says simply.

“You said she’s safe. Where?”

He gives a harsh laugh. “The fairy circle, where I devoured you the first time.”

“That mossy rock inside the stones?” My voice is calm for someone with severe delusion.

Kellan nods.

“I want to see her,” I demand. I steal a glance at the beast’s package in human form. It’s normal looking. Well, larger than normal. But not monstrosity so. And erect. “Then I’ll come with you,” I add, clenching my jaw as soon as the words come out my mouth. I have nothing to go back to. My life with Connor is over.

And I need to protect Pía.

Nothing to do with the mind-blowing monster sex from my dreams. Nothing at all.

We walk to the Fairy Circle. Kellan takes up the pace behind me, probably in case I try to run. I wouldn’t. Not when he has my sister. The wind screeches through the trees, making the forest seem lonelier. I would draw my cardigan around me, but the vine cuffs around my wrists make it difficult. Kellan is indifferent to the fact he’s not wearing any clothes. I’m the opposite. I’m ultra-aware of it. In fact, it’s hard to focus on anything but the gorgeous, naked Scot at my heels even if he has another darker, more demonic guise.

“Why do you have two forms?” I ask as we make our way to the edge of the treeline. In the center of the field, the dark shapes of the stones are almost visible.

“All unseelie have two forms,” he replies, making no sense to me.

I glance back at him, making sure I keep to his face. “Like I know what that is.”

His upper lip curls into a smirk. “Unseelie is the darker Fair Folk.”

“I see,” I say, not really seeing.

The Fairy Circle looms. Inside the circle, atop a boulder, is a splash of red. *My Canada Goose jacket*. It’s not long before the rest of Pía comes into view. It looks like she’s sleeping peacefully, knees tucked into her chest, head on her hands.

I run-up to her, trying to wrap my arms over her despite the vine cuffs. A cry comes out of my throat when I touch her skin. It’s icy cold. I check her over as best I can, confirming that she’s alive and breathing. *Just fast asleep*.

I swivel my gaze to Kellan, anger surging back to make me braver than I should be. “She could have got hypothermia, leaving her here like this.”

“Relax, I put her to sleep using my powers. That’s the lack of heat you sense. She won’t feel anything until she wakes,” he says, eyes dark, almost black. “The full moon is almost here. We need to go.”

“No. I need to get her home first,” I shoot back at him.

“You have only a short amount of time to say goodbye, Cairìona. They are coming,” Kellan warns. Birds screech in the distance and the wind ravages through the air, reminding me of my dream.

I lick my lips, clutching at the padded coat around my sister. “What are they?”

“They are The Host. The Wild Hunt. They crave you just as much as I do.”

It makes little sense. “But why?”

He cocks his head. “By the time I tell you. They’ll be upon us.”

“What about my sister?”

His eyes narrow, and then, after a few seconds, he sighs. “Call them.”

“What?”

“Your kin. Call them. Let them know where she is.”

The cuffs around my wrists fall to the ground. I grab my phone from my pocket, dialing the house.

“Hello, Aunt Cora?”

“Rí, oh thank God. Where are you? We’ve been worried sick. Nell is out looking for you.”

“I’ve found Pía,” I say, eyes brimming with unexpected tears. “She’s okay. We’re okay.”

“Where are you? I’ll come and get you.”

“The Fairy Circle?” I say slowly, glancing at Kellan.

Cora sucks in a breath. “Where?”

“You humans call it Falcolm Stone Circle,” Kellan sighs.

“I mean Falcolm Stone Circle,” I say, wincing.

“Are you sure? That’s miles—” I cut her off before the lump in my throat can get any worse.

“Goodbye, Auntie,” I say into the gale as it tangles my hair around my face. I shove my phone into my pocket and lean forward to kiss my sister on her cheek. “I love you, Pía,” My face is as cold as hers is now. I don’t notice the temperature difference anymore.

Kellan is watching me as I walk toward him. His eyes are full-on black now. For the first time since I’ve seen him as a man, he frightens me.

The insanity of it all hasn’t quite sunk in.

I’m still in a dream.

His eyes bore into mine. They’re such a deep green. And like the woods they remind me of, they’re so easy to get lost in.

“There’s one last wish you wanted me to grant,” Kellan says with a smirk.

My brow furrows. “What are you—”

He grabs me and kisses me, the force of it sucking the life from my body until I’m as cold inside as outside. As his tongue glides against mine, he pulls me to him. He’s so warm. I feel my body relaxing into him, and my mind drifting. *He’s putting me to sleep like he did with Pía.*

He draws back before I go under completely. I’m vaguely aware of him kissing my head and then whispering Gaelic in my ear. “Níl cara ag cumha ach cuimhne.”

“Where are we going?” I slur, as he picks me up in his arms and carries me away from the stones.

“To my home, Cairtìona. Now I’ve claimed you, I can return.”

The raging zephyr snakes around us as we step through a slash in the air between trees, but I sense it far away, just like the foul birds that seem to hate me.

And the forgotten life I’ve now left behind.

TO BE CONTINUED

Thank you for reading an excerpt of *Gods May Cry: Monsters of the Dark Fae Book 1*.

If you'd like to read the full story as soon as it's released, you can preorder it here:

Gods May Cry: Monsters of the Dark Fae

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

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Lea Jade is the paranormal pen name of Mallory Fox, a USA Today best-selling author of dark contemporary romance. Lea/Mallory lives in London with her bean-shaped dog and the rest of her non-furry family. As Lea, she writes epic reverse harem paranormal and fantasy romance stories with plenty of magic, monsters, and mayhem.

When she's not pandering to the whim of her grumpy jack-chi or clumsy cocker spaniel, you can find her word-wrangling her next crazy adventure and listening to Ed Sheeran while sipping an oat decaf latte at her local Costa.

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BLURB

I'm falling down the rabbit hole into Cheshire's Den of Debauchery.

I'm obsessed with my desires and only one thing can bring me satisfaction - **Caterpillar**. Whether by luck or misfortune, he can be bought. I only need to make a deal with Cheshire and his deals have the tendency to go sideways.

However, this time... *his plotting might not unfold exactly as he planned.*

Story Notes: Smoking, mention of drug use, sex work, ovipositor and other interesting anatomy, light degradation/humiliation, mmf, death of non-main character, dub con/pheromone influence, and British English is used in this story

CHAPTER ONE

Cheshire's Den of Debauchery stood in front of me as I clutched my purse full of banknotes. A dark building in the depths of Wonderland. The door had a black and white spiral on it as if you were about to walk into an endless tunnel. Above the door was a likeness of the owner. A big mouth smiling from a devious cat face.

The eyes on the doorway statue followed me as I approached and when I reached for the handle, the smile grew wider. It was as if it was sentient—Cheshire's mute gargoyle doppelgänger watching as you bid morals goodbye and stepped inside.

I swallowed and started to reconsider. I could still turn around. I looked at the monstrous mushrooms behind me, glowing with green and blue bioluminescence and thrusting upwards to staggering heights. The forest of Wonderland was always unnaturally quiet.

If I went home now, my mind would return to this spiral door and what lay behind it. It would come back to him. The one person who could satisfy my desires. The man that had become my lust-fuelled obsession.

I was twenty-six and desperate for satisfaction. Desperate for him. I'd tried all other avenues to satiate this need inside me and all had failed. Being insatiable made me ravenous. I couldn't live with this unmet demand inside me any longer. It was making me single-focused, every moment preoccupied with him.

With Caterpillar.

I barely brushed the door and it swung open invitingly, all too happy to accept me inside. Once again, I was falling down a hole in Wonderland. It was a small comfort that this hole was merely metaphorical.

Stuffy warmth embraced me as I stepped into the den. The sounds of Middle Eastern music emanated from every corner—the twang of a lute being strummed, the fast-paced notes of a dulcimer's strings being hammered with little mallets, a woman with a collection of hand drums. She tapped and smacked the surface of her current drum of choice, her body undulating rhythmically to the beat.

A robust woman swathed in translucent red fabric danced languidly in front of the band—her hips fast and smooth as they swayed back and forth, her belly and feet on full display, her head flung back and eyes closed as the music moved her.

One breast shifted free from the fabric and she made no move to hide herself. I found myself gawking cheekily at the pebbled nipple as the bangles on her wrists jangled. The round metal sewn into the fabric of her outfit clashed together like tiny tambourines.

The place had a light haze in the air, smoke rolling against the low ceiling. The sound of bubbling hookahs purred beneath the instruments as if it were part of the song. It was a very intimate place, smaller than I had imagined, but there were hallways and doors that led to unknown rooms. The smell of incense and herbs, of dried flowers, and something subtly sinister persuasively purred within my nostrils.

Immediately I tried to find Caterpillar, my eyes quickly scanning the bed-like booths of bodies moving against one another. My face heated but still, I looked for him, boldly peering at open displays of sex like I'd never seen.

“Alice,” a smooth voice said. Cheshire always sounded entertained. “What brings you to my

establishment?” On the bar counter to my left, glowing green eyes and a wide smile appeared before the rest of his cat body slowly came into view.

“Is that sanitary, an animal atop the bar?” I asked. To this, Cheshire laughed in delight. I only gave him attitude because he expected and enjoyed it from me. Our first meeting was when I’d accidentally stumbled in Wonderland as a mere wisp of a girl. I was confused, scared, and frustrated with the denizens—lost in a strange land with inhuman things and peculiar logic. Cheshire had still managed to be the odd one in a world of oddities.

I didn’t meet Caterpillar back then, despite seeming to meet most everyone else. He was still just a dream in my head—a fantasy crafted from the stories I’d heard and one picture I’d bought from Mad Hatter this past year.

“Tell me, Alice. What led you here? Are you once again travelling down paths to which you know not the destination? Need some guidance?” He asked playfully, batting long lashes framing large, sparkling emerald eyes.

“I know the destination,” I mumbled, my willingness to banter drying up as things came to head. He softly padded closer, moving across the bar until we were only inches apart.

“Oh,” he said in mock surprise. Everything was a mockery to Cheshire. “And what is your destination?” purred intimately in my ear. The brush of fur pressed into my arm as the music and smells swarmed. Bodies writhed in my periphery. I swallowed, overwhelmed and a fish out of water. My eyes danced over the glass bottles behind the bar but I didn’t want the false courage that drinking offered. I wanted to be as clear-headed as possible for the momentous approaching moment.

First, though, I had to lay my peculiar desires on the table for others to see. No one ever understood and some even thought me vile for it. What type of woman sought out the touch of bugs?

Plus, Cheshire wasn’t one to confide in. He loved to discover someone’s weakness and find ways to make it benefit himself. Well, I supposed I’d make that part easy on him. A quick exchange of money would be nearly painless.

“I would like to purchase someone’s time,” I said as Cheshire finished rubbing against my arm. The permanent smile on his face grew.

“Hungry for something of mine, Alice?” he teased.

“Do you want my money or not?” I asked in indignation. “Maybe I should just leave,” I looked at the shadowy entrance where the door hid.

“Don’t be brash. You haven’t even told me if someone is somebody or anybody.” Always with his playful speech.

“Caterpillar,” I whispered, my face hot. Sweet-smelling smoke from other patrons went into my throat, making me cough.

“Hmm, what was that?” Cheshire asked with wide eyes. I couldn’t tell if he was toying with me or genuinely didn’t hear. Attempting to discern when Cheshire was serious was a fool’s errand. He wasn’t even serious when he was serious.

“Caterpillar,” I said as I finished clearing my throat.

“Oh my,” Cheshire said as if scandalised. “You’re in luck, though. Shaheen is currently free. However, he’s only free because he sent the last customer away before anything ever happened. He might do the same to you.” Large, green cat eyes peered unblinkingly into my own.

“What do you mean?” I asked. Caterpillar’s name rolled over in my mind—Shaheen. I hadn’t known it. Most everyone just called him Caterpillar.

“He’s pompous and narcissistic. Some people like that, though. Is that what you like, Alice? Or is there something else about Caterpillar that makes you wet?”

“That’s none of your business,” I said in offence, my face hot. Perhaps it was ridiculous to be offended by a crass statement in a place like this. I wasn’t sure. “What do you mean he sent the last customer away? I plan to pay...”

“Yes, you will pay and there are no refunds,” Cheshire laughed. “So if he thinks you’re unworthy, then you’ll toddle home unsatisfied and with much less money.”

“How much less?” I asked, wondering if this was really my best option. A paper appeared from the smoke above my head and flitted down towards my waiting fingers. A number was written on it that made me cringe. I’d brought exactly that much but had hoped to only use a percentage. I had to wonder if Cheshire had a way of knowing exactly what I had on hand so he could demand all of it.

“Maybe someone else will do? I mean, if he’s too expensive,” Cheshire said, his voice cloying. He was searching for more information. I shot him an annoyed look and pinched open my clutch. Cheshire gave me a small laugh, knowing full well I was avoiding giving him answers but giving him answers all the same. Yes, Caterpillar was too much. And no, no one else would do.

“Here,” I said, pressing a neat pile of banknotes on the counter, then sliding the stack towards Cheshire. My family would be shamed if anyone found out I was in a place like this. Society would thrust us out in the cold. Those concerns had a way of feeling unimportant while in Wonderland. It’s not as if normal people were aware of this world nor this devious den inside it. Only people more than a little mad could find themselves here.

However, if there was a way the entire world would find out, I’d still be here paying the devil for a taste of Caterpillar. My mind filled with the image of him and I grew impatient, my fingers shaking a little in anticipation. My thighs pressed tight together, an attempt to control the excitement I felt between them.

A blue-grey paw pressed on the top of the banknotes, claws coming out a half-inch to scrape across the paper. Cheshire smiled—as always.

“Through the curtain and down the hall. Good luck.” I nodded and swept my eyes around the room. A few of the workers were looking me over. The patrons were much too engrossed in their own desires being met. In darkened booths, I saw bodies sliding against one another. In others I saw men and women in a slumber, long pipes still clutched in their sleeping hands.

The music seemed louder as I finished my talk with Cheshire. I walked across the room, ignoring the burn in my cheeks as I moved towards the beaded curtain. I pushed past it, the wooden beads brushing together quietly. There was no light in the hallway, just the glowing remains from the other rooms filtering through the curtain.

Two green eyes appeared on a ledge against the hallway wall, a striking image in the shadows. Cheshire was back for another last word. He always loved to leave everyone reeling as a final send-off.

“Formicophilia,” he purred and I inhaled sharply. Of course I knew the word for what I had. I’d searched for many things on the subject. “Many people come for Caterpillar but none so far for that. What a novelty you are, Alice. Usually, it’s his other attributes that drag people in to give the bug a try. But you’ve been dragged in because he is a bug,” he broke off in laughter, highly entertained by my desires.

“You don’t know anything,” I said angrily, stomping forward.

“There’s no hiding what you want. Not from me.” How he knew was beyond me. Cheshire had many tricks and many little birdies who loved to talk. Mad Hatter could have told him. I stopped walking and swallowed, choosing to remain silent. If I kept talking, Cheshire would just keep talking. He always needed the last word.

“Have fun,” he purred knowingly, his voice fading as the glow of his eyes did as well. The smile was the last to go. I blew out a breath, feeling the burn of embarrassment on my cheeks.

“Who cares if a cat knows anyway,” I grumbled, walking forward. Of course, that cat clutched the puppet strings of Wonderland these days.

Thick, red fabric covered the entrance to Caterpillar’s room. I stood in front of it for a moment, taking a deep breath and trying to calm myself down. The object of my lustful obsession was just beyond the curtain. I was nervous, excited, concerned. I swallowed down my emotions and pushed through the barrier into his room.

There were draped fabrics, plentiful cushions, rugs, and beautiful glass lanterns just like the main room. However, there were also the mushrooms from the forest, growing right from the floor and glowing their blues and greens, offsetting the rich reds in which the room was decorated.

In the farthest corner, I saw shadows and smoke. I heard the gentle bubbling of water as a hookah was sucked. More smoke billowed out from the cloud.

He was here. I couldn’t stop my hands from shaking now, couldn’t stop my heart from rapidly pounding in my chest. I thought of all the nights I’d used the idea of him to find my pleasure. I thought of the hundreds of times my fingers brushed over his picture before hiding it in my drawer. I was overwhelmed with conflict. Either he would be everything I dreamed of, or I would find out I dreamed of something too good to be true.

Slowly, I moved towards him, shuffling silently. This room was hazier than the one up front, giving a dream-like quality to the space. The dim lighting and bioluminescent mushrooms didn’t help that feeling. I started to wonder if I’d look back at this room, unsure if it had all been just another dream.

I heard the water in the hookah softly purr once again. Smoke rings shot out from the space Caterpillar sat. Red curtains were pulled to the side of the grand canopy bed he lounged in.

“Hello,” I called, wondering if he even realised I was here. New smoke rings flew through the centre of older ones until finally, the procession stopped.

“Who... are... you?” From a curtain of smoke, his measured words dripped in disdain. Two all-black eyes pierced me through the fog, looking me over as if I was unworthy of his time, despite paying an arm and a leg to have it... to have him.

He held off smoking as he awaited my answer. The smoke around him slowly shifted away, parting as he leaned forward to get a better look at me. I held my breath as he started to come in view.

His eyes were large and all black, he had two antennae that came from his forehead like horns. His face was beautiful—pouty, downturned lips that curled slightly in distaste as he eyed me, thin eyebrows that curved in judgement, angular, high cheekbones, and dark hair someone had braided with strings of gold.

He had on a white robe with gold detailing on the edges. It was open wide, a tan chest on display. His four arms pulled my attention. Two of his arms pressed into the bed as he sat up and leaned forward. His third arm gripped the hookah hose, holding it loosely to the side. His fourth arm reached for a glass. I watched as he removed an absinthe spoon from the top before plucking the cloudy, green drink up and bringing it to his mouth.

Golden bangles were on each of his four human arms and a red silk scarf was draped loosely around his throat. Gold earrings dangled from his ears. He blinked down at me, his thick black eyelashes flirty despite his obvious displeasure of my presence.

I swallowed as my eyes moved to his lower half, which discarded any pretence of humanity. His lower half sat in a twisted heap, like a snake resting on a log. He wasn't smooth and scaled like a snake, though. Instead, he had a series of bumps, rings of wide ridges from his pelvis to the tip. The skin of his tail was a rich sapphire that paled in the front and looked soft and almost velvety to the touch.

Also unlike a snake's body, he had legs. A shudder rolled over my body as I imagined those appendages gripping me all over, pulling me close into his body, and holding me tight.

"Who are you?" he asked again, more agitated this time. His black eyes waited on me as he pulled the absinthe back to his mouth and drank. I watched the apple on his neck bob.

"Alice and—"

"Stop," he said before setting the hose tip in his mouth and pulling another bubbling drag of smoke. Steam came from his nostrils like a dragon, then he opened his mouth and let the smoke trail out as he talked.

"What do you want?" he asked, smoke tendrils dancing from his mouth towards the ceiling. I understood now why some teased that he was a Persian prince. It was his attitude, along with his looks. My eyes trailed over his lower half. I was staring, forgetting to blink.

"You," I said softly, wanting to reach out and touch his lower half. To feel his skin with my fingertips and rub the ridges of his body. He wasn't impressed with my answer, though.

"Obviously," he said apathetically, rolling his eyes. "Try again." Now I was confused. I'd told him the truth. All I wanted was him. Every part of him. All of him. He was perfect, just how I imagined. Better, even. I felt awed by the creature in front of me. How could my imagination and that faded black-and-white picture ever be good enough after having him in front of me?

I recalled Cheshire saying Caterpillar sent the last person away and grew anxious. I couldn't be sent away. Not now that I'd seen him in the flesh. Seen that he was exactly what I needed.

"I want you," I tried again.

"Wrong," he snapped, leaning forward, his face coming closer to mine, stealing my breath. His large black eyes looked vicious. His gaze swept my face and the anger left him, replaced with a huff of annoyance.

I was not doing well. Now I was very nervous that I was just a moment from being sent away.

"You want me but I'm not sure I want you," he paused to pull more smoke from his hose before finishing his statement, "Alice." My name came from his mouth along with a thick, twisting vein of smoke. He then blew the rest in a puff directly in my face. I coughed. It smelled like honey and roses over the tobacco. I waved the smoke away as I tried to clear the scratch in my throat.

"Prove to me it's worth my while," he said, a devious smile curling his lips. Caterpillar laid on his side in the bed, most of his tail now hiding behind his lounging body. His lean upper body was stretched out on display. He moved the hookah hose down to his hips, gripping the long mouthpiece in a tight fist.

"I don't understand."

"Suck it," he said.

"What?" I asked because he couldn't be serious. He wanted me to suck his hookah hose? "You're

joking.”

“I don’t joke,” he said very seriously. He gripped the mouthpiece tighter, wiggling it a little and taunting me with his eyes. He was treating it like his cock but I wasn’t even worthy enough to have his actual cock in my mouth. He would rather embarrass me than have my mouth on him. Maybe he hadn’t really sent the other person away, maybe they left in offence.

I couldn’t leave, though. I had to have him.

I walked up close, my eyes scanning his lower half curled behind him on the bed. My gaze swung down to where he gripped the mouthpiece like a stiff erection. He kept that teasing smile on his face, turning his nose up a little, and probably waiting for me to turn and leave.

I swallowed and dropped to my knees. The blue skin of his lower body made my heart beat faster. I was already wet, already clenching in want between my legs. I guess humiliation really wasn’t much of a sacrifice in the face of my obsession.

I leaned forward, my fingers pressing into the mattress as I put my lips on the tip as if I meant to smoke it. My face was burning in embarrassment as I felt him watching me with his judgmental eyes. I steelled myself to the task and let it slide past my teeth. My lips gripped the glass as I took it deeper in my mouth, feeling the odd, ridged shape roll up my tongue.

Finally, I pulled off and sat back on my heels, looking to see if that was enough for him. If he’d let me stay.

“Was *that* supposed to convince me?” he asked, his voice layered with disapproval. He wasn’t letting me off easy. I let out a breath, accepting he needed this. If Caterpillar wanted me to prostrate myself in front of him, I would. I’d prove to him my desire. I’d let him humiliate me and I’d do it gladly if it meant I could have more of him than just a worn and faded photo.

I looked into his black eyes as I kissed the side of the mouthpiece. It was made of red glass with a bumpy texture that reminded me of his body. Once that thought was in my mind, I couldn’t let it leave. Maybe his cock looked like this mouthpiece, a dramatically ridged length that would pop inside me in intervals. Maybe he’d count off how many rings he could fit inside me. I hoped dearly he’d give me that pleasure.

I moaned and took the mouthpiece in my mouth, the glass sliding on my tongue to the back of my mouth. I lavished it, bobbing my head up and down, pretending it was really him. A laugh startled me back to reality and I looked up, my lips still around the mouthpiece.

“Well, you really do want it, don’t you?” he asked, his eyes finally lighting in true amusement. My cheeks heated and I pulled my mouth off the hose, sitting back on my heels and looking at the floor, embarrassed but not regretful. I was much too committed to my adoration to regret doing anything he asked.

My eyes followed the hookah hose as he lifted it back up to his mouth. The slick, saliva-coated tip settled into his mouth as he pulled another drag. His lips were shiny where my spit transferred from the hose tip. It was an erotic sight made even more so when he slid his tongue across his lips, tasting it. He smiled knowingly at me.

“I suppose I can let you use your mouth on me, Alice. Try not to let me down.” One of his arms came down, the bangles on his wrists clinking together as he moved.

I stayed sitting on my heels, my mouth threatening to gape in awe as his fingers trailed suggestively down a slit below his hips. It opened up and an erection emerged from inside his body. It was the same sapphire colour of his tail with the head an even deeper shade. Layers of bumped ridges went

from the base to the head. The tip looked like a rosebud with seams on the sides.

Caterpillar brushed his length with the back of his fingers, showing off. He had every right to show off. I'd never seen anything like him. I never would again, surely. Another one of his arms brought his drink back to his mouth. He took a small sip before tipping his head to the side, watching my speechless amazement.

"I'm waiting," he finally said dryly. I sucked in a breath and scooted closer, lifting my blue skirt as I shuffled forward.

I took him in my mouth. I couldn't wait another moment. I craved to have him brush past my lips and settle on my tongue. I wanted somewhere, anywhere, filled with a part of him. I'd settle for my mouth for now.

He hummed as my lips slid down his pointed head. My tongue teased the seams that ran down the edges of the tip. Liquid was seeping from him constantly. A lubricant for him to invade a body—my body. A shudder of delight raced over me.

I pulled my mouth off him a moment to study the seams of his cockhead. There were three lines from the tip to the base of his head, giving the flower bud appearance even more weight. My thumb brushed up the texture and he took a deep, shuddering breath he attempted to muffle. I looked up to see his black eyes on me, his taunting expression was strained.

With my eyes on him, I lowered my mouth, lavishing his seams and wrapping my fingers around his base. His eyes closed, his head falling back as he gave a small groan that rattled every inch of my body.

My head descended, taking more of him in my mouth. My hand pushed under my skirt and between my legs. Over the cloth of my undergarments, I began to rub, needing to touch myself so badly I was shaking.

His head tilted forward and he watched me work with half-lidded eyes—watched my lips grip his ridged shaft, watched me squirm as I brushed my cunt for pleasure. I was pathetic in my need for him, giving his cock every ounce of skill I could. I abandoned teasing myself to boldly slide my fingers up his abs appreciatively.

He was a divine display of manhood from the hips up. Muscled with a rich tan and soft skin. My fingers found the golden ring pierced through his nipple. He gave a huffed laugh of amusement, entertained by my curiosity as I touched it. Then he hummed in approval when I began to tease it. His head fell back again as I kept bobbing on his cock.

I pressed him to the back of my mouth where he jutted against the tight opening of my throat. He seemed to enjoy that because he gave a strangled noise as his hips pushed closer, meeting my mouth.

Suddenly, one of his four arms reached down, gripping me. I shivered from his touch. He gently pulled me off the floor, then he shifted upright and settled me on the bed beside him.

Caterpillar ignored me after that as he began to mess with his hookah, removing the ceramic brown bowl on top and cleaning out the burnt remains of his shisha tobacco. His cock remained unsheathed from his body, the tip continuously leaking fluid that slid down his impressive shaft.

I pressed my knees together and squirmed, frustrated that he stopped me. My hands threaded together nervously.

Shisha was tobacco leaves, coated in a flavoured syrup. He loosely packed it into his bowl with tongs.

"Did I do something wrong?" I finally asked. I could still taste him in my mouth, earthy and

pleasant. His eyes flicked to me before going back to his task at hand, a secretive smirk on his face. He prepared the hookah for another round, finally transferring the fresh glowing red coals to the top.

“This is a very special blend,” he said before taking a series of small pulls. The smoke slowly grew as the coals’ heat made it to his tobacco. A mild citrus scent came from the smoke he exhaled. Finally, he pulled in a complete inhale and blew it out in a thick cloud. The smell was suddenly everywhere.

“Lemon,” I said.

“Yuzu,” he corrected. “An East Asian citrus.” The smell was still inside my nose and my face felt hot. He set the hookah hose down and looked down at me, his sharp cheekbones in juxtaposition to his soft lips.

“Do you know anything about how my kind mates?” he asked. He was so close, my body nearly touching his lower half perched beside me. The rest of his tail trailed behind him but I didn’t want to get caught staring at it.

My eyes slid to his cock, still glossy from my attention. I felt dangerously damp between my legs and wanted to smell that yuzu scent again. Something was intriguing about it.

“Pay attention, Alice,” he reprimanded softly. I looked at his face and nodded.

“I don’t know anything really,” I admitted.

“I figured,” he said. “You see, I’m capable of creating a special pheromone that has an aphrodisiac quality.” My pinched expression gave my confusion away. He sighed and flicked a lock of my hair from my face.

“It will make you more excited, Alice.”

“I can’t imagine that’s possible,” I admitted without thought, my eyes straining to look back at his caterpillar half. He gave a startled laugh before he could control himself and I felt my eyes widen once I realised what I’d said.

“You aren’t as dull as I assumed,” he said. The backhanded compliment settled warm in my stomach, making me feel light. I tried to control the smile forcing itself on my face. The idea that he was actually enjoying me, made me want to fly.

It didn’t matter, this was our first true meeting, I’d been in love with the idea of him for years now. A seed that burst open the moment my eyes finally took him in. I was swimming in lustful infatuation and the bone-deep craving I had for him was staggering.

Caterpillar, *Shaheen*, grabbed the hookah hose and held it between us.

“Is this what you came for, Alice? My pheromones that can bring you to greater heights?” he asked, black eyes holding my gaze.

“I didn’t even know about it,” I answered, and his eyebrows pinched in confusion before he smoothed his face back out.

“What is it you want?”

“You,” I answered again, brushing my hip against his side, touching his tail through my clothes. He narrowed his eyes but said nothing in response.

“It’s in the shisha, my pheromones. Would you like to try it, Alice?” Now I understood why the scent called to me. It was a pull meant to drag in a partner. I nodded, looking him in the eyes so he’d have no doubt. I wanted everything he offered. Everything, I thought, looking back at his tail, wishing he’d show that part of himself off more.

Confident, flirty eyes looked at me as he pulled the hose to his mouth. It dimpled his bottom lip as

he set the tip in his mouth. We were so close. I saw his chest expand as he pulled in a measured breath of smoke. He kept going as deep as he could go before finally pulling it away. His hand quickly moved to the back of my neck, his fingers brushing through my hair. Gently, he pulled my mouth towards his.

I gasped a little, my mouth coming open. Our lips weren't even an inch apart as smoke billowed from his mouth to mine.

The smell and taste of yuzu coated my senses and for a moment, I felt dizzy as I inhaled it deeply, leaning forward. Boldly, I slid my hand across his side, to the part of him that wasn't human at all. I felt the texture of velvet and shuddered. His eyebrows curved a little in curiosity but we couldn't talk as he expelled his pheromones into my body, making my desire ratchet up to soaring heights.

Then the smoke was gone and he pulled me the tiniest bit forward. Our lips met. It felt like I was sinking into pillows. I'd never kissed a man with such sensual lips. A moan came unbidden from me and my tongue darted out greedily, wanting more. He parted his mouth for me and then our tongues slid together in a dance.

I felt dazed, my hand still caressing the velvet texture of his tail, my breasts now pressing into his bare chest. I could feel the piercings in his nipples against me. He kissed marvellously—a practised way that spoke of many kisses before. It made me all the more enamoured and in awe of him. Of his skill, of his beauty, of his *tail*.

He pulled back and I whimpered in complaint. He chuckled, looking over my face in satisfaction.

"That hit you hard," he said. He thought it was all his pheromones making me this way. I brushed the back of my hand against that divine velvet texture of his sapphire skin and his eyes darted to where I touched him.

"You like that?" he asked. For the first time, I wondered if he had been purposely keeping his tail slightly hidden. If he lacked confidence about it. Did people not like it? It was beautiful.

"I do," I said. Which wasn't enough. "I really do," I tried again, but words weren't enough. I wanted to show him how much I loved that part of him. Before I got a chance, he pressed me onto the bed. My back flopped on lush fabric and a mattress, the softest thing I'd ever been on. My body felt hot and weighted down as I sunk in.

I'd fallen next to his tail. It moved. I watched him undulate, appendages and body rippling as it went. A moan crawled up my throat. I wanted those on me. Wanted to feel his legs on my skin, gripping every part of me, holding me to him as he pressed between my legs.

Caterpillar's upper arms settled into the bed by my head and he leaned down, his body touching mine. My skin ignited where we touched. The pheromones really were affecting me, I realised, making me more sensitive, making me so needy I shivered beneath him. My fingers pushed past the draped fabric he wore to touch the muscles of his abdomen.

"That's it, Alice. Touch all you like," he said in encouragement, looking down on me lucidly as I writhed beneath him, trapped under his body as I sunk deeper and deeper into the bed.

"Please," I begged for nothing in particular, just more. He shifted and I felt his erection pressing against my thigh, slick with his arousal. He'd pushed up my skirt so that our flesh would touch. Suddenly, I was stifling, drowning in fabric.

"Let's get this off and see all of you, Alice. I'm intrigued now and I'm rarely intrigued. There's something about you, though. Something special gleaming in those blue eyes." Then his lower hands were on me, opening up my clothes and pulling them off slowly. He took his time, his fingers sliding

up my legs, on my belly, across my collarbone until I was naked beneath him.

He hovered over me, smiling as he looked down, taking me in. I was embarrassingly pale. I almost seemed to glow in the bioluminescent light. He hummed, not saying anything. Long fingers came up, slowly brushing up from my hip, sliding across my ribs, teasing the skin on the side of my neck. He left burning trails in the wake of his touches that made my back bow. He buried his fingers in my hair, gently tugging out what was left of the hairstyle until all my golden locks were spread across his sheets.

“Beautiful girl,” he murmured to himself. “I think I’ll fuck you,” he said louder. I hadn’t realised this was all still a test. That I’d still been on shaky ground until I was bared in my entirety before him.

“What do you want, Alice?” He asked again. His voice was hazy, swirling with the smoke that had yet to escape the room.

“Every part of you, Shaheen,” I murmured, my voice thick. My hands trailed down his abs until I reached the velvet texture of his caterpillar tail. The head of his cock knocked against my hand and I inhaled. Our eyes locked and he looked stunned for a moment because he finally understood my words.

“Truly?” he asked, his eyes narrowing as if he didn’t believe me. To that, I scooted down the bed underneath him until his sapphire cock was in front of my face. My mouth trailed across his body as I went, dragging my lips over the skin I’d paid to touch. I pressed beneath the weight of his tail. His blue velvet skin pressed on every part of me, no clothing keeping us apart.

I groaned, seeking his cock with my mouth, sucking the bud-like head into my mouth and savouring it as I spread my legs and felt his velvety tail on my cunt. His lower half moved in a wave against me, rubbing against my core. I whimpered, unable to control the overwhelming feeling of finally having what I wanted—of finally experiencing the exact thing I’d chased all my adult life.

He groaned deeply as I took him farther in my mouth, sucking on him as he slid to the tight opening of my throat. His body writhed between my legs and then I felt them—his many appendages. They were soft, velvet strength that brushed my ankles and calves, then my thighs and hips.

I gagged around him, suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling of all of him. I thought I was going to explode in ecstasy as I felt all his legs against me, brushing in a tease. He pulled back when I gagged and I felt his limbs retreat. His two lower arms pulled me up so we were face to face again.

He looked angry, as if I’d done something to betray him. He must have thought me a liar, I realised. He must have thought his legs were too much. It only took him a moment to see his mistake. My blissed-out face, my hot cheeks, the way I panted, my hard nipples strained towards him—he saw it all.

“Oh,” he said in surprise, and then his mouth was on mine. This time his kiss felt less practised, more passion-fuelled. His tongue pressed in my mouth greedily. Two of his arms stayed pressed to the bed, holding him up. His other hands, though, oh God, his other hands roamed. They touched me all over, caresses that grew into more. Brushes that became tight grips. He flicked my nipples and touched my neck. Fingers trailed between my breasts and held my hip tight enough to leave marks. Then one hand was between my legs, long fingers brushing through my folds.

He knew exactly what to do, how to tease and then offer pleasure. Caterpillar’s fingers slid between my lips and then they brushed against my clit, making me buck against his hand and moan into his mouth. I was so sensitive, too sensitive. I felt his legs come back, all those legs, brushing my sides from feet to hip. His fingers gently glided across my clit. Once, twice, three times.

I couldn't hold it in. It was because it was him. It was his legs, his arms, his black eyes, his horn-like antennae. It was his pheromones in my bloodstream. I cried out, breaking our kiss. He watched me, looking enraptured by my face, by the way my body writhed, and the flush that crept up my belly and into my chest.

I whimpered, gripping his arms.

"So very sensitive, my Alice," he said and it sounded tender and sweet. It sounded nothing like what he did when I first came into the room. I felt his appendages go from brushing to gripping. I felt velvet between my legs undulate over and over, and I cried out again. It was too much, it was not enough. I'd never been so needy in my life.

I felt his velvety appendages between my legs moving across my cunt and I lost all decorum.

"Shaheen! " I cried, tears slipping from my eyes and he looked in awe.

"Do you want it all, Alice?" he asked, his face open and honest. I nodded and he reached out for the hookah hose again. He held up the mouthpiece, a series of round bumps like his cock.

"Show me how much you want my stiff cock," he said, black eyes heavy on me. I swallowed and nodded as he pushed the mouthpiece between us. I felt the glass brush my wet entrance and then slide in gently. Again I had to prove myself and I was more than willing.

"Oh," I said inhaling, back bowing. One, two, three bumps slipped inside. I gripped his arms and gasped as he pushed it in further, watching me with rapt attention. His appendages slid between my legs and pushed them apart. He held me open, held me down, as he started to fuck me with the mouthpiece.

He slid it in and out, his eyes tipping down to see it sinking in my body. To see where all his legs pushed me apart and held me down. Caterpillar bent down, his lips brushing my ear.

"You're going to take me so well," he murmured intimately. He pulled the hose out of me and pressed it to his mouth. My fluids coated his lips as he pulled in a drag of smoke. Then he tossed it aside and our lips pressed together. We kissed as smoke was traded between us. I tasted my own arousal on his lips and felt that flower bud-shaped head between my legs, sitting heavy on my entrance and leaking more liquid than before. I felt it slide between my lower lips, tracing my entrance.

The second hit of his pheromones made me all the more sensitive but nothing could have turned me on more than I already was by Shaheen. Not when all his feet were pressed into my thighs and calves, stretching me wider and holding me firm to the bed to be fucked. I felt his entire lower body undulate against me and cried out.

Caterpillar's erection started to push inside me. His head breached my entrance and I felt a sudden descent into madness, a taste of insanity. I tried to claw at his back but he used his upper pair of arms to hold my wrists above my head. Every part of me was now controlled by him, pressed down by him.

Slowly he pushed in more, his eyes creasing in pleasure. He inhaled sharply as he felt me around him. I squirmed in his hold but he didn't let me go as his ridged shaft began to plunge inside me. I counted in my head as I felt the rounded ridges pop inside me.

One, two, three, four. I squirmed and whimpered.

"Shh," he whispered softly.

Five, six, seven.

"Caterpillar," I cried softly, begging for the end of this slow torture. He was thick and the bumps

of his shaft kept teasing me, opening me up and then begging me to tighten, only to find another big ridge ready for me to take.

Eight.

“That’s it,” he purred, one of his hands brushing hair from my face. Another hand slid up my neck and caressed the side of my face. I felt myself clenching hard between my thighs. His legs massaged my inner thighs and calves.

“Can you take it all, Alice?” he asked, his hips pressing against mine even harder, threatening to push more inside me. I felt the velvet texture of his skin on my ass. He bent down close.

“I think you can,” he said. Two of his hands slid down the sides of my body before gripping my hips, holding me tightly as he worked to get every last inch of his length inside me.

Nine... ten. I moaned, feeling stretched and full.

“Oh,” he groaned deeply in half surprise before giving in to the pleasurable feel of my cunt gripping every ridge. He moaned as he began popping back out of me slowly. I tried to count but couldn’t, not when I felt the way I did and could feel the rumble of his groans across my skin.

Before I knew it, he was pushing back in. I felt near to delirium as he shunted all the way in.

“Sweet, sweet Alice. Who knew you had such a pleasurable cunt?” he said viciously, a predatory gleam in his dark eyes. They flashed with excitement, a smile stretching over his face. I sucked in a breath, suddenly feeling like prey while still in his grip, arms above my head, legs stretched wide with his legs, the velvety girth of his heavy tail pressing against me.

He moved in and out of me, his speed picking up continually.

“Yes,” I cried out. His legs moved over me, pressing down and caressing. I felt myself unfurl with the attention of his lower half. Only he could give me this and it was everything I needed.

Caterpillar held me down roughly, some animalistic part taking over as he lost his practised character and gave in to base instincts. The grip on my wrists was tight, the look in his eyes dangerous. And I loved it. I could love him. I could. My perfect Caterpillar.

I groaned as he popped every round ridge inside me. My noises mingled with his. There was a cacophony of throaty moans along with the rough slap of his body meeting mine again and again. It was so much different to have something shaped like him going in and out. He was nothing like the smooth shaft of a human man. Instead, it kept my body on high alert, constantly stretching and squeezing.

Caterpillar finally dropped my wrists and buried his face in the bed next to mine, panting, holding my hips, pressing inside me over and over. I touched the antennae on his head and he shuddered in pleasure. Then my hands wrapped around his back, encouraging him to keep fucking inside me as roughly as he could.

This didn’t feel like the meeting between a bought worker and their client. This felt too sloppy for that—too unfocused—and he seemed much too lost in his own pleasure.

“You should have wandered into my part of Wonderland much sooner,” he panted in my ear. We were pressed so tight his body ground against my clit as he thrust. I unravelled as he attempted to ask me what took me so long to find him. Why I hadn’t stumbled into his lair before.

Pleasure crashed into me. My body strained beneath him, tight and hot and he lost his words.

He cradled the back of my head, bringing my mouth to his ear so he could hear my cries of pleasure against him. A shudder rolled over him, his breath coming out in measured, powerful breaths.

“You sound like heaven,” he tried to say, his words interrupted by sounds of pleasure escaping him. Pressure built inside me and he sucked in a breath of shock.

“Fuck,” he complained in a breathy voice. I squirmed, the pressure was nearly too much.

“Caterpillar,” I whined, trying to wiggle away. I wasn’t sure what was happening. Arms and feet went around me, pressing me into his body to keep me from escaping.

“Don’t,” he said in a strained voice. “Oh, Alice. Oh,” he groaned. Something happened inside me. I sucked in a sharp breath. The tip of him felt like it was exploding open.

“Shh,” he hushed me, lips pressing into my forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s happening?” I asked but he couldn’t talk as he came. He gripped my face with two hands, his lips pressing into my head over and over with tenderness. His sounds weren’t dignified at all, they were deep, rumbling groans that pierced my chest and buried in my core.

“It’s going to be okay, my Alice,” he said with a strained voice. I felt something filling me up.

“Shaheen?”

“My eggs,” he groaned in bliss. “You’re going to take them, Alice.” A second thing was pushed inside me, then a third and fourth. I felt so full and stretched that I whimpered in discomfort. I gripped his back, my fingers digging in.

“Oh, pretty Alice. You most definitely lost your way when you found me amongst the mushrooms.” I realised his cockhead had indeed opened up. I could feel it wide inside as he forced his eggs in me.

“No more,” I whined.

“Shhh. Hush, there are no more,” he said, catching his breath. I realized we were trapped together, some part of him had changed to make us unable to move.

Caterpillar noticed my concern and went to work subduing me with touch, sweeping his multiple hands over my body tenderly, slowly. Fingers ran across my chest, playing at my nipples. He found my ear and sucked on the lobe, groaning a little. Caterpillar’s many legs massaged my body, relaxing me into a pacified state, then his practiced hands found their way between my legs, gently coaxing more pleasure from my over-sensitive body.

The sensation of fullness began to feel good, instead of concerning. It felt right. It felt like maybe this is why I really came here even though I hadn’t even known something like this could happen—a belly full of his eggs. I relaxed all my muscles and writhed beneath him, moaning as he pulled another orgasm from me, knowing just how much to touch and exactly where to rub and slide.

When I was spent, he began to pop his ridged cock back out of me, one round bump at a time. I shivered with each one that pulled out.

“You shouldn’t have come to Wonderland tonight,” he said with a lazy sigh. “Now look at what I have to deal with.” Was I something to deal with? He finally pulled all the way out, but then his long fingers replaced his cock, pressing as far back as they could go. I grabbed his wrists and looked at him with wide eyes.

“They’re deep,” he finally said, pulling his hand back out. He crawled up my body and held my face in his hands. He hummed as he looked at my flushed cheeks.

“What’s going to happen?” I asked, worry lacing my voice.

“Don’t worry, my sweet Alice. They aren’t fertilized,” he gave me a teasing smile, entertained with my concern. His eyes swept my face.

“Does this always happen?” I asked.

“Never even once,” he said, all-black eyes on mine. I sucked in a breath and felt warm again. The

pheromones weren't in my system anymore, though. No, this was warmth from his words. From being special. I hadn't been sure if it was just an act before—giving the customer what they paid for.

“Never?” I asked, looking into his eyes.

“Is there an echo?” he asked, and I glared at him. Still, though, I could see the kindness in his eyes. Could feel it with the touches his hands still gave my body—sweeping caresses. I lifted my head and kissed him. Our lips pressed together sweetly. When I pulled back, he cleared his throat and looked away.

“Those eggs will come out on their own within a day. You might have to walk home with your legs pressed tight together or you'll be dropping them all over Wonderland.” Then he moved off me. He leaned back lazily and watched me as I dressed, taking long pulls off his hookah after replacing the shisha with his normal flavour. The rings that he shot out of his mouth were shaped oddly, almost more like hearts.

“Whatever you do, don't tell Cheshire.”

“Why?” I asked. I could guess but I'd rather ask for full clarity.

“You know he's going to use this against you. Your,” he waved one of his hands around, “infatuation with me.” My cheeks burned.

“I know,” I mumbled. No point denying it.

“And still you came, knowing he would do that?” Caterpillar asked curiously.

“I had to,” I said shyly, looking over every part of him.

“Did you?” he asked before he pressed the mouthpiece to his lips. It was still slick from being pushed inside me. I swallowed.

“I did.”

“Hmm, and will you have to *come* again?” he asked after blowing a procession of smoke hearts. He ignored the shape. Did he not notice he was doing it?

“I will,” I admitted. This obsession was going nowhere, only growing now that I knew the taste of him.

“Even more reason not to tell him that I planted eggs inside you. Wouldn't want him to know the pull goes both ways,” Caterpillar said. I held my breath a moment, my heart pounding hard in my chest. *Both ways*, he'd said. I felt hot all over, my face burning.

He liked me. I pressed my hand to my stomach, full with the evidence of his feelings. I nodded and pushed my shoulders back, head high. I wouldn't tell Cheshire anything about my Caterpillar. Making Shaheen's life more difficult was the opposite of what I wanted.

“Of course, Shaheen,” I said with determination. He smiled, raising an eyebrow in entertainment.

“See you soon, Alice. I imagine you won't be able to go too long before needing to be stretched across a mushroom and fucked by a caterpillar.” My face burned. He was right. I bundled up my courage and walked over to him. He looked down at me curiously.

“Goodbye,” I said, then leaned forward, holding his face in my hands as I pressed a kiss to his mouth. He parted his lips immediately and I matched him, our tongues moving hungrily as our bodies were crushed together. When I pulled back, even he looked flushed under his tan. I knew I certainly did.

“Until next time,” I said and he nodded, his fingers swiping over his lips. He looked in a daze and I was glad I put it there. His eyes tipped down to my belly.

“Be careful on your way home,” he said, then his eyes darted away and he pulled the hookah back

up, taking on an air of haughtiness again.

“Of course, Caterpillar.”

CHAPTER TWO

"Hello, Alice," an amused voice came from behind me before I could leave Caterpillar's room. A large smile appeared, followed by two villainous green, glowing eyes. He shocked me bad enough I jerked back, my hand went to my chest as I gasped. Once I composed myself, I was angry at being startled by Cheshire.

"I'm leaving," I huffed. Caterpillar looked greatly annoyed. One of his arms reached for the absinthe while another fiddled with the hookah bowl.

"Alice, Alice, Alice," Cheshire taunted. Something was off. I swallowed thickly, unsure of what to say or do. A creeping sense of dread was beginning to bloom in my stomach.

"Playing peeping tomcat? How vile," I said, trying to sound angry instead of nervous.

"Vile? What a lovely adjective. I do more than peep, though. I keep a record. Don't you just love what you can do with cameras these days? Doesn't take long at all to capture a couple in an embrace." A photo appeared from the smoke above my head and fell to the ground quickly. I could see from where I stood what it was. Me on my knees for Caterpillar. It wasn't the perfect picture, but it said enough, and everyone would want to believe the drama. It probably could have been a picture of two entirely different people but they'd want it to be me and would eat up the story.

It didn't help how many people had seen me tonight. Add then the loose lips of Mad Hatter telling people about my interest in Caterpillar.

"Blackmailing all your clients can't be good for business," I said in anger as he brushed against my leg.

"Don't be so humble, Alice. It's not just anyone I'd blackmail." He looked up at me with a victorious smile on his face.

"You aren't supposed to be in my room," Caterpillar said, with an unfriendly glare at the cat. His comment made something unclench inside me. I wasn't sure this was a regular thing and that he'd known the whole time. That I'd been betrayed when I thought we had something special. Clearly, that wasn't the case, though. He seemed even more upset than me.

"I'm tired of you thinking you have any say in how I do my business. You are my product, Shaheen, and need to swallow the bitter pill of subservience. Having Alice in my close care will help get you in line, won't it?" Close care? What did that mean?

"She's just another client to me," Shaheen sighed, not looking at me.

"Oh, Shaheen, don't be silly. Depositing eggs means something quite serious," Cheshire purred. He padded over and then hopped up on Shaheen's lap. Shaheen curled his lip and looked away while Cheshire laughed.

"So I'll tell you how this is going to go. Alice is going to be my newest employee," Cheshire said. I gawped at him.

"Excuse me?" I asked in shock. This was not what I saw coming. Which made it perfectly in line with Cheshire. Money is what I thought, favours perhaps—not being his sex slave for hire.

"You'll stay here, of course. Room and board are provided. I'm not a monster. I'm just a businessman."

"This is ridiculous," I said, blowing out a breath of air and crossing my arms.

"Don't agree and you'll never see each other again. Plus, I'll make sure everyone knows the establishments you go to, Alice. Even in your world." Shaheen suddenly grabbed Cheshire by the skin

of his neck, a look of rage on his face. Cheshire hissed and howled as Shaheen picked him up. My mouth dropped open in shock, a tiny gasp lodged in my throat. People didn't fuck with Cheshire.

"I'm tired of you thinking you have supreme control," Shaheen said with a growl.

"You don't have a choice, I own you," Cheshire spat back, his smile angry.

"Without me and my pheromones, your empire starts to crumble. I've only let you be in charge because I had no reason to go against you. Now you've gone too far. Threatening Alice? Really?"

"Please, what are you going to do?" Cheshire snapped. Shaheen smiled at him, his eyes seeming to have their own light.

"Time to get high on your own supply," he said, sucking in a deep pull of hookah and blowing out a huge, thick cloud of smoke that blanketed them from my view. Cheshire hissed and yawled as the scent of yuzu filled the area. Shaheen must have switched it out when we were distracted.

I felt the smoke on my body like little bites of electricity, tugging my nerves to life. The hissing stopped before the cloud began to dissipate. Shaheen dropped Cheshire to the floor. There was a soft thud as he landed on his feet but then he began to stumble around, looking dazed.

"You bastard," he hissed. I had to press my thighs together to try and combat the wetness and tingling pooling there. That had been the thickest cloud of pheromone-infused smoke I'd ever seen. Cheshire groaned as he tried to stumble away.

"Get him!" Caterpillar yelled, sounding a bit panicked. He had good reason to be panicked. He'd just dosed Cheshire, of all people. He was possibly the worst person to piss off in Wonderland.

I lunged forward, springing to action immediately. Cheshire leapt up at the last second and I crashed to the floor. Then, before my eyes, something happened I didn't think was possible.

Cheshire changed forms right above me. I had no idea he could be anything but a cat, but a moment later he looked more like a man, though one with cat ears and a very large tail. He was also entirely nude and on all fours directly above me. My eyes must have looked like saucers.

"There he is," Shaheen said with a condescending laugh.

"You will deal with this," Cheshire hissed, looking over his shoulder at Shaheen. Cheshire's cheeks looked flushed beneath a thin layer of fur and he had a dazed look in his eyes. His entire body had a thin layer of grey fur striped in a deep turquoise blue. His face had a strong bone structure but he had a button nose and a wide mouth stretched in an irritated smile. My eyes travelled down the stretch of his long body with powerful, flexed abs until I saw the straining tip of his cock hovering over me.

"Of course, my dear Cheshire," Shaheen said in a mocking tone, his eyes caressing the bare ass of the cat-man. "However..." he started, then paused to lean back and take a puff of smoke. More yuzu-scented smoke filled the air. I felt it between my legs, making me grow impossibly wetter.

Cheshire swallowed, the apple in his throat bobbed, and precum dewed up from his cock. His slit cat pupils expanded to wide, round circles. He ground his teeth together, two sharp little canines denting his bottom lip, and a small groan came unbidden from him.

I felt my own body react to him just above me. Never in my life would I have anticipated being attracted to Cheshire. Not only because he was of vile character but also because I thought he was only a cat. A magical cat, but a cat all the same. Right now, though, he was a man. A man with a hard cock that held a deep blush of blue at the somewhat tapered tip.

Cheshire's cock looked unlike any cock I'd ever seen. The top half was smooth and slightly tapered. The bottom half of the shaft had a bumpy texture, blunt thorns that were aimed backwards,

towards his body. I looked back up to see Cheshire glaring down at me, sparkling green irises bordering his blown-out pupils. His eyes trailed over my face and down to my chest, where he clearly noticed my hardened nipples straining against the fabric of my dress.

"I'll help you're straining situation," Shaheen started again. "However, I won't stop until you're addicted. The Den of Debauchery is now a co-ownership. That is... if you want relief."

"Who's vile now?" Cheshire asked me in entertainment.

"Alice?" Caterpillar asked. "Would you rather stay or leave?"

"I'll stay," I said. I wasn't sure I could even walk home in this state. I felt beyond needy and surprisingly, it wasn't just for the caterpillar but also the nefarious cat-man above me. "If that's okay with everyone."

Cheshire rolled his eyes.

"Oh, I think he's more than fine with that. Aren't you, Cheshire?"

"Shut up," he hissed at Shaheen who laughed in response. "It's fine she stays. The poor girl looks..." his eyes trailed down my body again. "Almost in pain." With that clarity of consent, I decided I needed to quench my curiosity and reached down, wrapping my hand around Cheshire's erection.

His eyes widened and his cock jerked in my hands. I ran my fingers over the barbs. They were firm but not too sharp. I found it hard to move my hand up and down them, though, and moved back to the upper half, gripping and twisting my hand around the smooth skin of his upper cock.

A little meow jumped from his mouth and we both stilled. I looked up and his wide eyes veered away from me in embarrassment, a frustrated little smile still curling the edges of his lips.

"That was so cute," I said to Cheshire. Shaheen laughed loudly as I watched him switch the bowls out, putting the normal shisha back in rotation, thank goodness. Another potent hit of his pheromones at this moment and I'd be deliriously humping anything with a vaguely phallic shape.

Shaheen moved from his bed, his body sliding forward on his lower half. His long fingers threaded through Cheshire's turquoise hair atop his head. Cheshire's back arched and his eyes closed slightly in pleasure. Then Shaheen gripped the strands and roughly tugged him upright on his knees.

Cheshire hissed, baring his sharp canines. I looked over his body on display in front of me. He was leanly muscled with thick, muscular thighs that I ran my fingers over and squeezed. His cock bobbed in front of him, looking almost painful in how hard it was.

"What's the saying? Never get high on your own supply? How unfortunate," Caterpillar said, smoke trailing from his mouth from the last inhale he'd taken. He reached around and flicked the tip of Cheshire's cock, making him whimper. I felt his thighs clench under my fingers as more precum dewed up.

"What are we going to do with him, Alice? I think we should torture him a bit." Caterpillar's all-black eyes looked down at me, a teasing smile on his mouth. His antennae looked more than ever like devil horns. He then shoved Cheshire forward.

Cheshire's palms hit the floor on either side of my head, his body coming dangerously close to touching mine shoulder to hip. I sucked in a breath, my nipples straining, my legs naturally spreading but then getting caught on Cheshire's legs, trapping them from widening farther.

Cheshire pressed his face close and inhaled a line up my neck, his nose trailing up the sensitive skin as he went. A deep purr rumbled in his chest, making the hair on my arms stand on edge as I squirmed beneath him.

Shaheen went back to the bed, lounging supremely upon the edge. He clicked his tongue as you do for a common house cat. His tail moved up on the bed, lounging beside him.

“Here, kitty, kitty,” he said with dark delight. Cheshire grunted a complaint but dragged himself away from me, walking lithely on all fours towards Shaheen. I took a deep breath and sat up. I watched his cat tail swish in agitation as his sculpted ass flexed.

“What do you think, Alice?” Shaheen asked, gripping Cheshire’s jaw in his fingers as he pulled the hookah hose to his mouth and inhaled. He blew rings towards Cheshire that encompassed his whole head and settled around his neck like a collar. Cheshire jerked his face out of Shaheen’s hands and batted at the smoke ring collar. Shaheen blew more rings towards Cheshire’s hard cock.

“I think he should suck the mouthpiece,” I said with a smile. Oh, how delightful a sight that would be—to see Cheshire on his knees sucking a hookah hose.

“You heard her,” Caterpillar said in all his regal glory. He pulled the hookah hose below his hips and gripped it once again, like a steady erection. I revelled in the look of offence on Cheshire's face. Regardless of his offence, I could still see his barbed cock flushed blue and dewing precum. Obviously, something he was very aware of, too, because instead of complaining, he leaned forward and began licking the tip like a cat sampling warm milk.

Shaheen looked up at me in entertainment as the other man licked the phallic thing by his hips.

“I’ll make you sorry you did this,” Cheshire grumbled between licks. His tongue ran up the sides of the long mouthpiece, lavishing the bumps. I was standing to the side, watching him, hardly able to control my desire. The smell of yuzu seemed clogged in my nose and I felt desperate for touch.

Cheshire’s eyes flicked to me as he licked the mouthpiece, his eyes holding mine. I was held in place by his pointed gaze. While making sure I was watching, he reached forward and brushed Shaheen’s closed slit, making Caterpillar startle. Cheshire smiled at me, his tongue licking the mouthpiece tip as his fingers began to sink into Shaheen.

My eyes widened as I watched Shaheen’s hold on the hose slacken and an undignified noise came from him as Cheshire slowly slid two fingers into his slit, opening him up and causing the ten ridges of his hard cock to be revealed.

My mind immediately kept replaying the way Cheshire’s fingers had sunk in and spread him. I could almost feel the sensation between my legs and wasn’t sure how I felt about Cheshire clearly trying to seduce me.

Cheshire pulled his mouth from the hookah hose, slapped it away, and then wrapped his hand around Shaheen's ridged cock. He scooted forward a little and bent his head down. Shaheen’s fingers gripped the blankets underneath him and my heart beat fast in my chest as I watched these two creatures battle for the dominant role.

“How about I suck something more interesting,” Cheshire said, his smile wide before his lips surrounded Shaheen’s cock in a sudden act of defiance and skill. Cheshire sunk down on the cock, the shaft disappearing into his mouth, and there was nothing submissive about it despite him being on his knees.

“You’re supposed to play by my rules,” Shaheen said with a broken voice. Cheshire seemed lost in the act of what he’d begun, though—his face flushing more, his eyes dazed and teary as he looked up at Shaheen and then me, his mouth full of cock. He gave a little whimper and his cheeks hollowed. He was lost in his desire, his hand darting towards his cock as it jerked between his thighs.

“Don’t you dare, it won’t help,” Shaheen said, and Cheshire growled a little but obeyed, pressing

his hands to the floor instead. Shaheen began to take charge, sliding in and out of the willing mouth, fucking Cheshire's mouth with both heat and victory splashed across his face.

"Go ahead, Alice, touch him. He looks so pathetic I might lose my arousal," Shaheen taunted, his fingers threading through Cheshire's turquoise hair. Caterpillar rubbed his cat ears and Cheshire's angry face turned to one of bliss, his eyes beginning to roll in the back of his head.

I went to the ground beside him and wrapped my hand around his erection. Cheshire sucked in a sharp breath but was then gagged by Shaheen pressing deep into his mouth, making his eyes water.

Cheshire couldn't look down but still tried to see my hand wrapping around him and squeezing. He trembled, his breath coming quicker. I slid my hand up the slick skin of his cock, avoiding the barbs on the lower half. He shuddered and moaned as I twisted my hand as I went.

"Perhaps it's time to share Cheshire's secret," Shaheen said, his breath coming hard as he shifted his cock in and out of Cheshire's mouth. He stopped teasing his ears and gripped his hair in a tight hold, making sure he stayed in place as he used the other man's mouth. Cheshire shot him a look of disbelief at his words and Shaheen chuckled between heavy breaths.

"Oh yes, I know your little secret Cheshire. I know that you aren't as apathetic about everyone as you seem." Cheshire's eyes widened and he tried to talk, but Shaheen juttet his cock deep in his mouth again.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my hand glided over Cheshire's erection, enjoying the weighty, slippery feel of it in my hands. I wondered what it would feel like pushing between my legs, the Cheshire Cat in this form, hovering over me with a smile. The barbs were a daunting thing that intimidated me, much the same as the cat himself.

Cheshire growled and Caterpillar laughed.

"What did you say, Cheshire? *You aren't just anyone, Alice,*" he repeated Cheshire's earlier words. Cheshire bit down a little on his cock, making him suck in a breath of pain and toss the other man off him. Cheshire fell backwards, a wide smile on his face. He wiped at the spit trailing down his chin.

"How dare you?" Shaheen snapped while Cheshire crawled over to the bed and then climbed on top, pushing Shaheen on his back. Caterpillar's lower body moved to hang off the bed, the tip of his caterpillar body circled around my ankles.

"I dare to do as I please," Cheshire said, his fingers pressing against Caterpillar's cock. He quickly pushed it back into the slit it came from as he straddled Shaheen's caterpillar half.

"Is that right?" Shaheen asked, sounding unimpressed as he let Cheshire touch him.

"Now," Cheshire said, after pressing Shaheen's cock back inside him. He lined his cock up to the slit opening and began to slide the tip of himself inside. My eyes widened as I watched Cheshire's cock disappear inside the other man, rubbing inside and likely brushing against Shaheen's cock as well. The tip of Shaheen's tail gripped my ankle tightly.

"*Oh,*" Cheshire said, losing all sense of dominant power as he flushed and shuddered. The moment didn't last long. Shaheen rolled, making Cheshire fall off him and onto the bed. He gripped Cheshire by the nape of his neck, holding the cat-man down as he yowled in a complaint, fisting the blankets, his ass high in the air and tail swishing agitatedly.

I thought Caterpillar was about to fuck Cheshire right then and there.

"Come here, Alice. Cheshire is shy but I know what it is he really wants." I started to climb on the bed and his black eyes zipped to me. "Clothes off," he commanded. I inhaled, the commanding tone of

his voice sizzling on my skin. I began to pull off my clothes, all too aware Cheshire was watching, even with his face half smashed into the bed. His eyes scanned me all over, cataloguing, memorizing. I felt exposed with his cat eyes on me.

I was flushed all over, feeling hot, my limbs heavy. I climbed on the bed with the men, wondering what Caterpillar kept alluding to.

Cheshire stopped struggling when I got on the bed, his slit pupils going wide again as I approached, his fingers gripping the blankets. Shaheen kept holding him down, like Cheshire was a bad kitty who had done something naughty.

“What does he really want?” I asked Shaheen.

“Hmm,” Shaheen hummed in response. “Lay down, darling. Spread your legs and show him your beautiful cunt.” I did as he asked, exposing myself. My legs stretched open and their eyes weren’t shy about looking. Shaheen bent down next to Cheshire’s ear.

“You should hear the sounds Alice makes when getting fucked,” he said. Cheshire snapped at him and hissed but his attempt was all for show since Shaheen still had him held down.

“Let me tell you what I think,” Caterpillar said. “See, I’m no great manipulator like you, Cheshire, but I’m no idiot. Sneaking into my room to watch Alice and me, threatening to bring her here under your thumb, the flash of jealousy I saw in your eyes.”

“*Please*,” Cheshire said with a huff and eye roll, a little smile on his face.

“What exactly was your plan with Alice here? Let me guess, she’d get the room right next to yours.”

“What are you implying?” I asked in shock. There was no way Cheshire could be interested in me. He took pleasure in our banter but there was nothing special about the way he treated me. I was another *thing*, like everyone else. I didn’t think Cheshire was even capable of being interested in something other than himself.

“Let me go,” Cheshire grumbled, and Shaheen shrugged and removed his hand. Cheshire suddenly crawled to me across the bed, his movements smooth and predatory as he eyed between my legs, his cock jutting forward. Feeling like prey, I attempted to close my legs, but he was already close enough to shove them wide again and crawl between them.

Suddenly, his body was above mine, blotting out the light. The scent of him tickled my nose, a strange scent that was both sweet and bitter—like candy and ash. His face was shadowed but his eyes glowed green above me and his mouth was particularly easy to see, a stretched smile of delight as he looked down at me.

I felt his cock touch my inner thigh and sucked in a breath. There was no way he could like me, right? There was just no way and yet, I considered it and felt myself clench between my legs. I imagined having both Caterpillar and Cheshire as mine—lovers that quarrelled even in bed but offered so much. Excitement scratched inside me.

“What am I to do with you, Alice?” Cheshire asked in entertainment with glowing eyes and that statement of a smile. When my legs tightened on his sides, he reached out and pushed down one knee into the bed, making me completely open with him hovering so close.

“Come on, Alice. The cat doesn’t have your tongue. So tell me, what do you think I should do with you? I’m curious what you’ll say.”

“Curiosity killed the cat,” I mumbled and he laughed, the noise vibrating across my skin. I was so horny and so intimidated by him all the same. His cock slid across my thigh and then I felt the tip

knock at my entrance. I inhaled sharply, tensing up in anticipation.

“I know what I’ll do with you,” he purred, and I felt the tip of his cock push into my entrance. My walls clamped down on him.

“Still so tight, Alice, even after fucking Caterpillar. That’s okay,” he leaned down and I felt his lips on my ear, his breath tickling me. “I’ll stretch you back out,” he promised with a purr. He pulled back and smiled down at me from his shadowy form, eyes glowing, smile wide. I felt his cock push inside me further and I whimpered as he worked his way in slowly.

He only pushed in halfway and then pulled out again, giving shallow thrusts in and out.

“What a delicious cunt,” he growled. “Regret wandering through Wonderland’s woods yet?” he asked. I whimpered, my hips pressing towards him to take all of him instead of half. I had no idea what that barbed lower half would do but I wanted to know.

Smoke suddenly surrounded us, rings flying all around, the scent of yuzu thick in the air again, making Cheshire’s pupils dilate to discs and for me to cry out and wrap my legs around him, begging for more.

“Fuck me harder, Cheshire. Please,” I whined and he looked down at me in shock as I clawed at his back.

“Go ahead, Cheshire. She’s begging for you,” Caterpillar said from behind him. “She begged for me too. Such a needy girl.” Cheshire sent a glare over his shoulder but sunk a little deeper in me. Still not enough, though. My back arched and I cried out. I felt delirious and his shaking arms gave away his own struggle.

“Ah I see, you need a little help,” Shaheen said as his body came in closer. His tail slid underneath me until I was laying on him entirely, his appendages gripping every part of me, making me feel wild and manic. Cheshire was on him too, his legs straddling his body and still half-buried in me.

Shaheen’s cock protruded from his slit again, all ten blue ridges and the liquid seeping from the tip for lubrication as he positioned himself behind Cheshire. Caterpillar pressed his haughty mouth to Cheshire’s ear.

“Now be a good pussy,” he whispered in amusement and then began to enter Cheshire. Cheshire made an irritated meowing noise and fell on me, his back arched so his ass was up. I could see Shaheen gripping the base of Cheshire’s tail, using it as leverage as he sank inside him ridge by ridge.

Cheshire panted in my ear, then began to lick me. Shaheen groaned, his haughty demeanour cracking with pleasure. He looked divine towering over us, his muscular body coated in a thin sheen of sweat as he worked himself inside the other man.

His appendages began to grip me a little harder as my back brushed his velvety texture. Cheshire’s thinly furred chest pressed into my hard nipples as he purred in my ear, licking and giving little bites.

“Alice,” Cheshire panted in my ear as Shaheen filled him up. I reached up and rubbed his cat ears and he groaned.

“Alice,” Shaheen said and I looked at him. “You want all of him?” he asked, checking in.

“Yes,” I rasped out and Cheshire moaned in my ear to my response. Shaheen shunted forward, his abs tightening as he forced the other man fully inside me. I felt the bumpy texture of the barbs as he went in deep. Shaheen bent over Cheshire, breathing heavily and savouring the feel of Cheshire’s tight body around him.

“Now tell her,” Shaheen said to Cheshire. Cheshire ignored him and moved his hips slightly,

creating friction for both me and Caterpillar. He couldn't move much, though, just squirm between us, making us all irritated for more.

"Tell her or I won't move. You want me to fuck you, right?" Shaheen asked tauntingly. Cheshire growled.

"I came to spy because it was *you*," Cheshire admitted. "I planned to blackmail you into being my personal sex partner."

"Of course, that's your way to go about things," Shaheen sighed and rolled his eyes.

"I was offering everything," Cheshire snapped, pressing up on his hands. He looked down at me even though he was talking to Shaheen. "Offering her a beautiful room in my den. Offering her whatever she wanted. Feeding her whatever she pleased. Clothing her in whatever she desired. I'd been planning this ever since Mad Hatter told me she was infatuated with you, Shaheen. I knew she'd come to my den at some point."

"A very beautiful prize but a nasty tactic, Cheshire. I swear, you are the most uncivilized being I know. You court the girl. Give her presents, get to know one another romantically," Shaheen explained.

"You wanted me to be yours?" I asked, still in shock from his honesty.

"Are you opposed to the blackmail?" he asked. Was he serious?

"Yes," I said in disbelief.

"I'll try the courting gifts then," he said. Then his eyes widened as Shaheen began to pull back out.

"Good kitty," Caterpillar complimented. When Cheshire began to pull out of me as well, the barbs dragged across my walls, trying to latch in.

"Oh!" I cried out. The sensation was overwhelming, tugging at me, scrapping at pleasure. Shaheen pushed back inside Cheshire and Cheshire pushed back inside me, his soft balls tight against my body. I whimpered and writhed. Caterpillar's appendages massaged my body but also held me down tight.

Then we all began fucking in earnest, all three of us touching, rubbing, and moaning—unable to hold back any further. Cheshire purred against my ear as he licked strips up my throat, his canines nipping at my flesh.

"My darling Alice," he murmured, half in broken pleasure, half in his perpetual amusement. Shaheen shunted into him and Cheshire had trouble maintaining his composure.

"Good *pussy*," Shaheen panted to Cheshire, whose back arched even more. Shaheen kept a tight grip on the base of Cheshire's tail, using it to move the man back and forth against his body. A few more forceful thrusts from Caterpillar and then his black eyes were looking up at me.

"I'm going to come," he told me, his face cracking in pleasure. "I'm going—"

"Do it," I said, giving him permission. He groaned and looked at me as he shuddered and came inside Cheshire.

"Oh," Cheshire hissed, his body trembling, and I felt his barbs sink in further to my walls, sticking in place as he throbbed dramatically inside me. He unloaded hot spurts of cum, groaning in my ear while his chest rumbled with purrs.

I came then, cracking all over. A manic laugh burst from my mouth as my body trembled, a wash of pleasure so intense it broke my sanity. Caterpillar's appendages caressed me all over while barbs clung to me, not allowing Cheshire to exit. Shaheen gave one final groan, still looking at me while he finished. Cheshire licked a line up my throat and finished with a playful bite to my ear.

Shaheen pulled out with a sigh and moved away. I felt the undulations of his body as he gently set

us back on the bed. Cheshire was stuck inside mestill, his barbs clinging tight to keep us latched together.

“How long?” I asked.

“Cheshire is stuck in Alice’s cunt. Who’d have thought?” he asked with a rumbling laugh. I felt his barbs sharpen slightly, and sucked in a breath. He gave a pleased, evil-sounding hum as he licked up my neck again.

The bed moved as Shaheen came back to us, a mouthpiece nestled between his lips. He winked at me.

“What are you—” I started, then he exhaled a thick cloud of yuzu-scented smoke. Cheshire and I groaned. His softening cock that he’d pulled out halfway grew hard and he shunted back inside me quickly, rutting into my wet cunt.

“Bastard,” Cheshire panted in amusement, breaking off in a little laugh. Shaheen grabbed his tail and gave it a playful tug.

“Didn’t I promise to addict you to us? We have a long night ahead,” Caterpillar said, his face coming through the cloud of smoke with a glimmer in his eyes. Cheshire thrust inside me and I moaned. The hookah bubbled and flying smoke hearts raced around us as the sounds of flesh meeting flesh took on a rhythmic pattern.

CHAPTER THREE

I awoke with light streaming through the windows, trying to remember where I was and perhaps even who I was. I could hardly get my head on right as I groggily came from the smoky haze of sleep.

I sat up in bed, pushing off a thick layer of blankets weighing me down. I rubbed my eyes, trying to get my blurry eyes awake and focused.

Memories trickled back to me—all the very many positions as if we meant to rewrite and expand the Kama Sutra. The barbs, the ridges, the eggs that I had passed embarrassingly in the washroom. Shaheen had been waiting outside, knowingly, and made sure I was okay. He had been such a tender man beneath the narcissist clothes he wore.

And Cheshire, a *man* of all things. Well, mostly a man. Man enough to crawl between my thighs and lick strips up my cunt before pushing his barbed cock inside me over and over. And the way the men were together too—their minds and mouths full of snark and fighting for dominance while their bodies moulded together in heated thrusts of passion.

Had it all been a dream? It must have. There was just no way all of that happened. I looked around my room and could hear the birds outside in the trees. I pulled open my nightstand drawer and took out the picture of Caterpillar. My fingers brushed over his face and then trailed to trace his caterpillar half.

It seemed a tragic progression of events that I'd now be having dreams of not just him but Cheshire as well. How was I to face Cheshire again with those dreams burned into my head? They felt so real but a cloudy haze surrounded it all. Dim lights, strange colours...

I sighed and got out of bed. Just as I was finishing with my clothes, a shriek came from downstairs. Our maid's shrill cry had me dashing down the stairs, clutching the bannister as I sailed down as fast as I could.

I found her at the front door, her face white with shock as she struggled to keep herself standing.

"What's wrong?" I asked, and she stumbled back slightly. I saw the legs of a man outside, sprawled out. He had on mismatched striped socks and untied leather shoes. As I tentatively came forward, I saw the dead man in his entirety, his gaze still as crazy as ever but the colour leached from the eyes. Mad Hatter... dead and on my doorstep.

"There's a note," the maid wheezed. I looked at her and she nodded at me. I took a deep breath and leaned forward, snatching the note shoved into his hat next to the 10x6 paper. I swallowed. Wonderland had never come to my doorstep. I hadn't even known it could. Who could have done this and why?

I unfolded the letter to see perfect, long calligraphy written in a strange purple ink that reminded me of berries.

"A courting gift from a cat. Here is your dead rat." Underneath, he'd signed his name in large looping letters: *Cheshire*. I stumbled back in shock, nearly falling over before the maid lurched forward, and caught me.

"It wasn't a dream," I mumbled in shock. A dead rat... Mad Hatter had told my secret to Cheshire and then paid the price for loose lips with his life. This was far from an appropriate courting gift. *Courting gift!* From Cheshire of Wonderland! I pressed my hand to my head, feeling dizzy.

"There's something else," the maid whispered, as if talking too loud would rouse the dead lunatic.

She pointed at a small parcel in front of the body, half his arm covering it. I shuffled forward and quickly snatched it up. I tore into the parcel paper to find a beautiful silk scarf and inside that was... I wasn't quite sure.

I pulled out a long glass—I squealed in shock and attempted to cover it with the scarf again while the maid looked on in confusion. It was a blue glass dildo shaped exactly like Caterpillar's cock.

A note fluttered out as I scrambled to wrap it up from anyone's sight.

"Miss Alice," the maid said, handing me the little envelope.

"Thank you," I mumbled, flipping it open and pulling out the notecard. The writing was just as practiced, but the ink was a deep crimson red that matched Caterpillar's hookah. I read it.

"Something to keep you filled when away from Wonderland. See you tonight?"

"Well, what do they say?" the maid asked, leaning forward with bugged eyes.

"It's nonsense," I responded quickly, shuffling back towards the stairs, clutching the dildo to my chest as it threatened to peek from the scarf. "Nonsense from madmen!"

"Well, shall I ring the constable!" she called out, trying to keep up with me.

"The what?" I asked in shock.

"The constable, Miss Alice."

"I guess. I mean, yes. Yes, better do that because of the body." She gave me a concerned look but nodded and shuffled away, mumbling under her breath that I was an odd one. Then she began to harp about the state of the country. Apparently, Mad Hatter dead on our doorstep was a sign of moral decay for the country as a whole.

I raced up the stairs with a smile threatening to split my face in half. It had all happened.

Then I frowned. I'd have to have a talk with Cheshire about murder as a courting gift. I couldn't argue the effort and thought, though.

THE END

Thanks for reading *Hookah Smoking Caterpillar*.
Want to read more? Check out my *Myths & Monsters series*!
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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Cute but Psycho <https://books2read.com/cutebutpsycho>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beatrix Hollow survives in a puddle of mud sometimes called East Texas. She writes morally questionable paranormal romance that frequently has horror themes. Sometimes there's even a strange kink and interesting appendage. She finds dark, steamy, and humorous themes fun. She studied creative writing and psychology at Virginia Tech, used to be a professional ice cream maker, and enjoys looking at artwork of raccoons.

<https://linktr.ee/beatrixhollow>



INCUBUS DREAMS
MAEVE BLACK

BLURB

Come little one. Enter the woods...

I've waited my life for her, the one to feed me and sustain me for life.
She wandered into my woods, losing herself to the riches of the Gnéasha.

She ate my food, drank our wine, and succumbed to her desires.

She couldn't leave now.

Now that I've tasted her, she was mine.

Don't run, little one, you're home now.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Stalking, luring, drugging, and noncon.

There are sexual situations with honorifics, squirting, unprotected sex, somnophilia, tail play, anal play, double-penetration.

CHAPTER ONE

Drew

Have you ever felt watched? That inkling of being seen without seeing what gawked at you from afar? Wandering eyes and silent whispers. I could swear they crept across my body, dissecting me, deep into my bones. It was nearly a film of darkness, letting me know it was never far.

Chills racked my frame, skating across like little dancing spiders as they invaded my safe space. They weren't real, but the sensation didn't falter.

Loud, excited voices hit my ears as we continued our trek toward the party. My friend, Vee, convinced me to come out. As we meandered through the darkness, regret filled me. *What am I doing?*

The woods were endless, the mystic underbelly of Dalphenia wet, cold, and filled to the brim with regaled stories of monsters in the dark. Especially when one ventured into the woods.

After six every night, the sun went down. Tonight was no different. Illuminated only by the lanterns strewn about, our path wasn't clear, but it offered enough for us to not trip over our feet.

"Where are we going?" I asked, hugging myself. The material of my sweater allowed too much wind to seep through, a chill raced over me, the cold biting at my skin.

"Just over here," Vee answered, pointing to a luminescent area. Twinkling lights brightened the area, but from our viewpoint, it was still dull.

"We've been walking for twenty minutes," I complained, thinking of how I wore slip-on shoes and not hiking boots.

The wind tussled my hair, whipping it slowly, like a gentle wave pushing back the sand onto the shore.

What I'd do for a coat and pants instead of this dress I chose to wear.

Vee grabbed my arm when I fell behind and laughed like it was silly of me to be slow. Hell, I avoided these woods like the plague, everyone with a brain did.

There were too many stories of people venturing out here and never coming back. Yet, somehow, Vee convinced me. A part of me hated that I fell for it. She was the most eccentric friend I ever had, always dragging me to places. She wanted me to live, since being a virgin at twenty-five was practically unheard of.

It was hard.

People didn't interest me.

Not men, not women, not non-binary folk.

Nothing grasped my attention or heart. Yeah, I wanted things. Vee knew some of these things. Thankfully, she didn't judge.

"I can't believe you're a virgin," she let out as we entered a break in the trees. There were people dancing, a bonfire of sorts, and tables wrapped in vines, flowers, and tulle. People were happy, cheery, and immersed in the glow of the lanterns.

"Could you be any louder?" I grumbled sarcastically, not noticing anyone turning their heads at me. The music playing was all instrumental and live. A few people sat in a circle, playing instruments I'd never seen before. One kind of looked like the pipe that Peter Pan carted around. Another looked eerily similar to a flute with strings attached.

But what caught me off guard was the guitar-like thing. Was it a lute? Old-fashioned, simple, like

what was played before technology was vastly developed.

It hit my ears, calming the frenetic beat of my heart, warming me. This area and Vee were red flags and I suddenly accepted them as if red meant safe and not dangerous, because the music soothed my concern.

“I could, but I think I should be quiet, no?”

She either didn’t catch my sarcasm or was purposefully acting coy. I shook my head, unable to keep the smile at bay. She pulled me toward the area where food was littered about.

There was so much color.

Everything here seemed vibrant and radiating a type of energy that could be felt as well as witnessed. Glitter touched each item as if a chef painted them with the intention of letting everything shine.

“Are you going to tell me those kinks you’ve been reading about?” Vee asked after she filled a plate full of random treats I couldn’t name if I wanted to.

Each one seemed bright, like how scientists depicted poisonous things. Too much color, oversaturated, a lure to animals. Death to soon follow.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I squeaked, feeling my fingers tingle, thinking of the books I’d been reading this past year. Especially my current one.

One caught my attention more than others. It was a stalker romance, where the man would sneak into her bed at night and have sex with her sleeping form. She wouldn’t stir often, but when she did, she was into it. She wanted him to come into her room and take advantage of her.

Especially while she slept.

Sex didn’t appeal to me in normal ways. When others talked about getting horny and experiencing sexual attraction, I didn’t *feel* that. When they watched porn, explaining what they liked, it didn’t *appeal* to me. When they talked about hooking up with strangers, I didn’t *see* the desire.

I was sure I was just wired differently.

What I did know, was every time I immersed myself in a dark romance book, especially the ones with non-con, dub-con, and consensual non-consent, my body heated up.

Something about fiction did it for me. It brought out this comfort for sex, arousal, and actually made wetness pool between my thighs. It made me question myself, why I couldn’t find this same feeling with reality.

The only time I ever got a heartbeat down there was when I read a sex scene in a book that seemed appealing.

“Look, Drew, I know you enjoy books. They’re great for escaping,” she started speaking, her eyes almost glowing with a color I never witnessed humans having. “But imagine if the things you read about were real...”

Thinking about what I loved being real didn’t scare me—*it should*—but, it intrigued me instead, making me want to experience it myself.

“That would be amazing,” I admitted, nodding my head with enthusiasm. It filled me, this heat, and somehow it pulsed between my thighs, burning like it was alive.

As if she had an idea, she smirked. “So, tell me about the most recent book. When we were at school, you mentioned a new one.”

Swallowing my nerves, I took a sip of the drink she brought. Before I could even muster a word, the flavor hit my tongue. I didn’t know what the particular taste was, only that I loved it. It

overwhelmed every little synapse of my brain, the sweetness mixed with this almost tang. It reminded me of the fruits with bright colors that had no name but I dreamed of often.

“Holy crap, this is divine,” I exhaled, taking another short sip, wanting to enjoy the way it immersed my mouth in some type of rainbow-esque feeling.

“You were about to tell me about the book,” Vee prodded, touching my chin and bringing my attention back to her. The way her skin burned mine had a shudder running through me. Her eyes seemed to glow green, like the vines you’d see in a rainforest, entrancing me.

“It’s a s-stalker romance,” I admitted, distracted by her gaze and trying to collect my thoughts about the book. For some reason, the male’s name wasn’t coming to mind. Hell, the woman’s name was absent from my brain too. “The guy watches her from afar. Everything she does. He keeps her close like she’s his prey.”

I squirmed, thinking of the way the character got off at the sight of the woman undressing. I wanted that. The intensity, the obsession and level of desire from someone, where only one person existed for them. They would do anything for them and were aroused to the point of exhibitionism by their naked forms. It didn’t make sense, since sex never appealed to me in real life. Fiction was just so much more appealing.

“So... he watches her?” Vee questioned with her eyes wide. She might be acting surprised, but underneath that wide expression, her teeth dug into her lips.

“He does, he...” I paused, not wanting to be crass. I’d talked about sex loads of times, but not with Vee. Well, not in this *detailed* kind of way. Her judging me was a big fear of mine. As a virgin, people expected chastity, a type of innocence I didn’t have.

She waved at me to continue, so I did. “He gets off on watching her, touching himself as she undresses or touches herself. When she’s in bed with another man, he kills the men when they leave. He’s *very* possessive.”

Her eyes darken, her pupils dilating like I was sure mine did. I smiled, thinking of how the woman in the book had no idea she was being watched, followed, or how every guy she slept with ended up missing.

He killed them all.

For her.

“So, you want to be stalked?”

“In real life, that’s crazy?” I questioned aloud, but deep inside, being watched and lusted after was intriguing. Danger tasted like fun in my mouth, just like this odd drink.

“What else does this book man do?”

I took another drink and bit into this bright blue tart she gave me. My brain seemed to fizzle and I let out a small moan in response. Realizing that the noise left me, my face heated. Vee didn’t seem bothered, she almost appeared turned on. As I analyzed her facial expressions, she waited for me to answer her.

“He has sex with her,” I finally admitted. Her gaze connected with mine then.

“I thought she didn’t know—”

Interrupting, I rubbed a palm down my face. “She’s entirely asleep, knocked out from her medications. He spreads her legs wide and licks her... down there.” My body felt molten, thinking of how the author described him tasting her, devouring her, and loving the flavor. Squirming, heat fanned at my throat.

A devilish grin overtook Vee's face like the idea was pleasing to her. My body heated as I thought of my book, how the first time I read it, I thought of a dark figure doing the same to me. Faceless, between my thighs...

Arousal swam inside me as I imagined it once more. It changed somehow. The man between my thighs wasn't a man at all. Or, if he was, he had two black horns, almost like the ones on an antelope or goat. Black, ribbed, pointy.

"He would get her nice and wet, then he'd come inside her after," I whispered, feeling wetness pool between my thighs. My body heated like it wasn't chilly outside. Sweat built on my forehead, making me readjust on the bench. I wanted that for me.

"So, the thought of a man taking advantage of you in your sleep turns you on?" Vee prodded, eyebrows high on her forehead.

I nodded and then shook my head. "In fiction... *of course*," I amended, not wanting her to judge me for my tastes.

I didn't watch porn or get off to it. Books, though, the mystery of fiction, intrigued me, a lot.

Come, little one. Walk into my woods.

The words sprouted into my mind, soft but tangible, like a whisper or caress. I wanted to hear the voice more... it called to me.

CHAPTER TWO

Aegan

She looked delicious. A perfect snack to absorb more energy, fill me up for at least a few weeks. Her hair was long, brown like the bark of my favorite spur trees. It had these little flickers of chestnut like the sun wanted those exact strands to be visible while she smiled. I missed my home of Darchon—where the world was somehow brighter and more colorful.

And fuck, her smile was glorious.

She giggled with Viantra, my little wispy woodland friend. We had a deal. I'd get her male humans and she'd get me female ones.

We'd been doing it for centuries, helping each other feed, keeping our lives everlasting. She was basically a little sister to me, someone who I'd always had in my life but would never desire.

This time, though, the female she brought me seemed sweeter somehow. Her fragrance appeared succulent, almost like a zuju fruit, the sweetest of our kind. The more I sniffed the air, the more it coated my senses. Along with something else, more potent.

Arousal.

The familiar scent of the female's sex energy hit me. But it was different. Unique. Like the strongest zap, hitting me straight in the balls. My cock hardened as the aroma wrapped around me, bringing me closer.

She wants to be owned. Viantra's voice hit my ears, pausing my steps. We could communicate with minds alone. Many in our clans could. Especially when we allowed it. Outsiders could too, they just didn't know how.

She enjoys reading books, Viantra added, her face twisted in amusement.

Books? Doesn't everyone enjoy books? Our ancestors forced us to learn history really young, some enjoyed it more than others, but no one hated reading.

Not those kinds, you oaf. She likes the kinds with sex. My heartbeat throbbed at those words. What a little minx, my next human was.

There are books with sex? I must find these.

Her amusement hit my mind, tickling my brain like a feather to my nose. *Yes, she loves the ones where men take advantage of women in their sleep. Using them up. She likes to read about them being watched, stalked, taken from their senses.*

My cock throbbed at the prospect. It needed to fill this female, push into her, spill into her, leaving my body fully satisfied.

She smells different. Sweeter.

She's a virgin.

My body ached at the word. It was rare, having a virgin. Not just for the fae, but in this world. Many loved sex, experienced it younger, living their lives. I couldn't blame them, sex energy kept me alive, felt amazing, and brought me power. When they screamed in pleasure, their moans fed me. Sustained my life.

I need her. The way my thought came across as a huff wasn't lost on me. I hadn't had a virgin in at least a century. Even then, they didn't smell the way this one smelled.

What is her name, Viantra?

Drew Murphy.

Drew? An odd name.

Humans are quite odd, she confirmed. Our eyes met across the wooded area once more. Hers glowed with green, letting me know this virgin was getting to her too. I didn't share until I'd used them up, and for some reason, the thought of sharing Drew with Viantra made rage course through me.

Calm down, I have my eyes on another. Her words didn't settle me. There would be no calm until I mounted this Drew, fucking into her with abandon.

Good, because she's mine. Wouldn't want to have to kill you.

She likes that too, a man who kills anyone who touches their female.

I'm no man, I grumbled, thinking of how female humans thought human males were comparable. I was an incubus, a king to my people. I could tear them limb from limb with my teeth, stab them with my horns, or even suffocate them with my tail.

They were nothing.

I can hear you preening, you cocky bastard.

I want her. Now.

Calm down, you beast. The meinshine hasn't kicked in yet.

Sucking in a huge lungful of arousal that blasted from Drew, I tried calming the proprietary parts of me that came alive with her scent. It overwhelmed me. So much, I had to block out Viantra from sensing how much power this human had over me already.

My body hummed for her. A heat, unlike anything I've ever felt, tangling me in its warmth. Her sex energy had tendrils, little tentacle-like glowing parts that wrapped around me, bringing me closer. The way they shone around her in vibrant purples both confused and attracted me.

I didn't realize I'd been edging closer to her until Viantra tried pushing into my mind. The wall I put up was impenetrable, though. Drew was mine.

She wanted me too.

Her glow was a vibrant violet—the closer I got, the brighter they reflected—they seemed alive, much more so than any human I'd had before. Most humans had dull strands, immovable. Not her, though, she brought out my ravenous desires, reaching for me. The need to fill her with my seed and eat the feast between her legs urged me forward.

Did she taste as sweet as she smelled? Because she smelled so decadent my balls hurt. The ache built as I stood behind her. She was slurring her words—the sweet drink starting to make her drowsy.

“Horns, Vee. I w-want to t-tug,” she couldn't finish her sentence before she fell into my waiting arms. The soft sound of her breaths releasing let me know she was asleep. She could tug on my horns as I ate her cunt, she could pull on them all she wanted, it would probably feel decadent.

“That was too close for comfort,” Viantra complained. I didn't pay her any mind, unable to think of anything but the female nestled against my chest.

Viantra's eyes went down my body and her eyes widened. “Don't think that's ever happened.”

She wasn't wrong. My cock didn't control me, I controlled it. Feeding it what it needed. It'd been months since I'd taken another. I'd nearly short-circuited from lack of sex, but Viantra told me she had a new friend she thought would be special. She wasn't lying.

“Leave.”

Viantra narrowed her vibrant green eyes, seemingly put off by my tone, but I couldn't stop. I couldn't think of anything but Drew and being inside her.

My energy wrapped with Drew's, entwining like rope. I'd never once had this happen to me.

“She’s special,” I rumbled, feeling the rasp of my voice like a dagger to my spine.

“She’s a virgin, that’s all.”

“I’ve had virgins,” I croaked, my cock throbbing even more, wanting to be seated inside her.

“She’s not like them.”

Unable to resist, I lifted Drew, holding her closer to my chest. My purr came, vibrating the ground beneath me, followed by a hiss and rumble, addicted to its bedmate for the night.

I didn’t offer a goodbye to my oldest friend. I simply took her gift and ran. My feet moved swiftly through the trees to my home. It was deep in the woods, away from prying eyes, where the only thing that glowed was my own gaze and the sex energy while I took from others.

My body sizzled where her skin touched me. Something was happening to me, and I wanted to take advantage of the desperation in my bones.

When I had humans in the past, I used them, took their energy, and sometimes they died from it, unable to survive the way my cock took them. This time, though, she gave me energy without me being inside her. I couldn’t imagine what sinking into her tight little hole would be like.

And when she bled around me? I roared at the thought. The primal parts of me overtook any common sense I had. I hurried to my home, almost there.

Once I hit the bridge, I rushed the door, slamming it open. Setting my female on the bed of leaves and tree branches, I stripped her.

Underneath her pretty blue dress was a plain cotton bra and thong. She didn’t move as I touched her, until I got to the hem of her underwear.

She moaned. Loudly.

My body heated at the sound, my cock begging to fuck into her. It needed patience. It never reacted this way, it would have to wait.

Sliding them down, I noticed her cunt, how wet it was and the spot it left on the cloth. My tongue escaped my mouth, stretching over an arm’s length to taste her pretty slit.

It was so wet, drenched with the stickiness of her nectar, and fuck, I itched to devour her. Consume her wholly.

Bending forward, my long tongue breached her seam, sliding up and down to her entrance. The flavor of her sent me off a cliff. The taste, fuck, it was like seeing for the first time. She was so, so sweet. It wasn’t a describable flavor. Something unique and her. I couldn’t resist, swiping up and down, sucking as much as I could off her heated flesh.

She moaned, and my cock begged for her. “You have to be patient,” I growled, unsure if I was talking to her or my own needs.

My body felt on fire. Each little electric tendril of energy hitting me like a whip, telling me to fuck her, take her, make her ours.

They had a mind of their own when starved, it seemed. My strands of sex energy were their own sentient beings. They were a part of me but individually their own too—and when they were hungry, they controlled the situation.

My tongue wrapped around her swollen clit, sliding over it fast, desperate, and her hips bucked toward my mouth, wanting friction. She looked so good blissed out.

I thought of the conversation she and Viantra had about being taken and stalked. I’d watch her. I’d take her. And when I was forced to let her go, I’d find her again, repeating the process.

Her whimpers met my ears as I stuck my long tongue inside her cunt, I curled it in her, making sure

to press against her pleasure spot, knowing she'd coat my tongue if I was a proper lover.

My tendrils wrapped around me, suffocating me with their yearning, and I made sure to keep my tongue deep inside, using my nose to thrash at her clit. When her body tightened and she cried out, squeezing my tongue with her pleasure, I knew I'd made her come.

Her sex energy slapped at me, pulling me closer, dragging my own into her. It was so powerful, a mind of its own. Usually, energy barely existed in others, barely offered more than a few shakes. Hers fought mine, pulling it closer like it had limbs of its own, as if she weren't human. I used my own to push hers down, holding each glowing purple tendril down.

Tasting her, looking at her naked form, she was definitely human. No horns. No tail. No wings. No glowing eyes. No big, sharp teeth.

She was just somehow special.

More.

I pulled my tongue out, loving how her scent and flavor overtook every part of my brain. Quickly, I undressed, my cock broke free as soon as I untied my linen pants.

Spreading my sweet Drew—my little one—I rubbed her cunt, thumbing her hole. It was so pretty and pink. So wet and open. It gaped at me, wanting to be filled. It'd hurt her, stretching her wide, filling her with my massive erection.

Playing with her entrance, using the pointed tip of my cock, her body squirmed as if she was aware. Maybe she was. She wanted to be fucked in her sleep, taken. She said so herself.

I pushed into her a little, the breach so fucking tight. The knowledge that I was her first, would be coated in her blood, the sacrifice of her innocence, it was almost too much to handle.

Pushing in more, she keened, her body canting off the bed. "So fucking delectable, little one. Your little cunt is strangling my big cock."

She couldn't hear me, couldn't feel what I did to her, but I could. Her heat wet my cock, leaking like tree sap from my world's trees. She oozed all over me and I thrust a tiny bit, moving inside her more.

The rigidity of my length seemed so harsh. The veins of my blue cock bulging with arousal. I seemed almost too big to fit in any part of her. I could glimmer, shrink it, but I didn't want to. I knew she could take me, even in her little hole.

Stiffness stalled me a few inches in, her virginity a crux to overcome. I pressed past it, feeling an almost snap before it eased.

When I got about six inches in, I could have sworn I felt Drew's breath catch, a sharp intake. Sinking in more and more, until my full ten inches and wide girth sat inside her, I had to wait.

My cock felt ready to burst, fill her with seed, and then steal her energy. But her energy kept me at bay, convincing my own golden ones to ease. The purple strands went for my balls, stroking, and wrapping around my chest.

Her strands acquainted themselves with me, surprising me more.

"I don't know who you are, little one, but you're mine, and that's all that matters now."

She squirmed and I felt a gush of liquid at my cock. I fucked my way home, bucking into her relentlessly. My hands automatically went to her clit, her cries filling my mind as she released on my cock.

I didn't know humans could release while asleep, but I also never wanted to give them pleasure before. Their pleasure didn't really matter, their energy was mine whenever I came inside them.

But Drew, my little one who was a third of my size, needed pleasure and I gave it to her willingly. Rutting into her like the monster I was, my tail wrapped around her leg, giving me leverage. As I was about to come, my Drew opened her eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

Drew

My body felt so overwhelmingly good. Alive. It felt *free*. Arousal hit me, burning up my chest, fraying my edges while making me moan.

“Yes, please.” My voice came out in pants. The way my breath hit the air, little wisps showed in the darkened room. Cold air. I was dreaming, had to be.

“More, more, more,” I chanted. Black horns filled my gaze, along with ripples of muscle covered with greenish-blue skin. And was that a tail wrapped around my calf? The beast thrust inside me, the soreness I thought I’d feel didn’t exist beyond a pinch. Pleasure consumed me instead.

My body was covered in moisture. I had dreamed of the arousal between my thighs, but they seemed even wetter now.

Split into two, my insides felt all warm while my body felt like it was speared, wrapped around something massive. When I peered down to my pussy, I saw a massive dick stuffed itself inside me. The eyes that met mine in the darkness glowed a vibrant blue, almost teal color.

Was I asleep? Did I ever leave the party?

A moan ripped out of me as the beast with massive hands rubbed at my clit. I’d always read about orgasms and how they felt, but I’d been too nervous to touch myself before. Was this what I was missing out on?

He rubbed at me and humped simultaneously inside me as I cried out, my release coming quickly. The sound of him rutting got louder as my wetness drenched him.

“That’s right, little one, coat my cock with your sweet juices.” *His voice*. The one from my head when I was with Vee earlier...

I met his gaze, amazed at the cut of his jaw. He was beautiful. Almost too beautiful. His eyes were a little wider than I expected, but his nose seemed sharp, pierced on both sides. His eyebrows made him appear cruel, but with how he entered me, I knew it was more from concentration.

Did he say *coat* him? That liquid came from me?

As he filled me fully, to the brim, my body sang for his. Holding my wrists down, he leaned forward. His tongue exited his mouth and it was huge. Holy hell. Long and darker than a normal tongue. It secreted liquid, drool maybe, and as it dangled over my open-with-shock mouth, I let it drop inside.

Fluttering my eyes closed, I absorbed the flavor and nearly cried out at the pleasing taste. “I must be dreaming. I haven’t read this book before,” I panted, feeling so full of bliss. His tongue traced my bottom lip and entered my mouth.

He swirled it with mine, growling, the sound so inhuman.

“Not dreaming, little one. My cock is stuffed inside your sweet cunt. You’re mine now.”

I blinked rapidly, my heart racing. This wasn’t a dream? His hips bucked and I screamed as he rubbed a spot inside me.

“You wanted this, little one. You wanted me to take from you while you slept, get my fill as you slumbered away.” The way his tail slid up my thigh, between my legs, so softly, distracted me from the fact that he said he was fulfilling my darkest fantasies.

“Do you have a tail?” I squeaked, not knowing why I asked a dream demon anything. He smirked, his sharp teeth poking through. Using it to rub at my clit, he leaned forward, watching me with

excitement. I moaned as it pressed down on my swollen flesh and I wiggled, wanting to touch it.

“I do,” he confirmed, licking my nipple before pulling out and hammering back inside me. “A nice cock too, if you can’t tell.”

I couldn’t help the giggle that escaped, squeezing him inside me. “I like it—” I started before whimpering as he pulled his tail away. He brought it to his tongue, licking my essence off of himself.

“You taste like nothing I’ve had before, little one,” he purred, closing his eyes as if he was absorbing the flavor.

“What do I taste like?” I asked, wanting to know. There were too many things I was embarrassed to find out myself. His tail swiped at my pussy once more, then rose to my mouth. Opening my mouth and sticking out my tongue, he placed the soft member against it.

I couldn’t help but swirl my tongue around it. My monster, above me, inside me, growled as I wrapped my lips around his tail. “Tastes so good,” I confirmed, letting his tail go. He seemed unhinged as I flicked it gently once more.

His body tensed and his hips bucked inside me. “I’m going to paint your walls with my seed, little one. I’m going to spurt inside you and you’re going to come with me.”

I nodded, knowing once this dream ended, I’d be sad. I had never had sex. I was too scared. I wanted to feel what it felt like but never found anyone, of any gender, who gave me any feelings of arousal. No one who was worthy of my body, my virginity. But this gave me hope. A type of desire I never had before. Maybe dream sex was what I truly needed.

His movements picked up and he wrapped his tail around my breast, grabbing purchase as he plunged into me.

He roared and I moaned, a chorus of our ecstasy echoing through the hut we were in. It felt too good, too real.

“Come for me, little one, give me your pleasure,” he growled in demand, and I did. I unfurled as he rubbed my clit and soon after, his hot release filled me.

Thank goodness for dreams; I couldn’t get pregnant from him not wearing a condom.

That’d be a nightmare.

I didn’t want kids.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aegan

Her scent overwhelmed me. Like zuju and the finest wine, she consumed my every breath. Something about this was different, entangled, an energy that didn't make sense.

"You're delectable," I growled into her ear, nipping at it. She moaned and blinked her eyes at me.

My little one wasn't a talker, at least not in this sex haze I had wrapped around her.

Did she enjoy my cock? The way I pleased her?

I didn't often care about pleasing women, taking their energy was my only goal, but Drew's pleasure—my little human—I wanted her to scream out of joy and not horror.

"Does my cock please you?" I asked, my tone gravelly, brutish, and barely recognizable. Fuck, she did something to me, entranced me in her human way.

She nodded. "Yes, dream demon, your cock feels amazing."

"Not a dream—"

"Harder, fuck me harder," she begged, her eyes connected to mine. Somehow in that expression, she matched my intensity and I couldn't deny her a thing. I bucked into her, using my tail as I would my palm. Wrapping it around her delicate neck, I tightened, and the way her skin felt against mine had my cock near spurting again.

Did she rub some kind of herb on herself? An elixir to get me under her spell? Her purple haze slid over me, tentacles of desperation.

I gripped her hips, my claws unable to stop themselves from digging into her. If only I still had my wings, I'd cocoon her and wrap her in a suffocating fuckfest.

"I'm coming!" she yelled and I swallowed her little noises, choking her with my tongue. She squirmed, needing oxygen. Only when she started writhing did I allow her air.

She panted, but the glazed expression she offered me was reason enough to be rough. Pulling out of her before spurting my seed again, I licked down her body, tracing her human features, the curviness of her hips, the dips on the sides. With her cunt spread wide, I couldn't resist licking her pleasure essence away.

Once again, I felt high, the scent she emitted was addicting and I felt myself rutting against her thigh as if I could sink inside it.

Something about this human set me off in unexplainable ways. I licked at her. She was as succulent as a frozen treat. Unable to stop myself, I plunged my teeth into her thigh, tasting her life essence.

Blood consumption wasn't something I partook of often, it was too intimate, bonding me in some way to another. Even now, I felt a connection tying me to my little human.

She screamed, but not in pain, she loved the drug-inducing bite too, moaning and humping the air as if in heat.

At this moment, we were animals, primal, monsters in the woods.

Pulling my teeth out of her thigh, I licked her sweetness, needing to savor each sip I stole. "You're such a treat, little one. My little human with such deliciousness to offer."

"Mmhmm," she moaned incoherently, still seeking that friction from me.

"What do you want me to do to please you, hmm?" I requested, knowing I could escape inside her body forever and never find myself sustained. "Tell me what you want."

Her gaze penetrated mine with hunger. "I want to come on your wicked tongue." Smirking, thinking

of how good she tastes, I licked her still bleeding thigh.

“Only if you ride my face,” I compromised, knowing she wouldn’t deny me. There was a feral look in her eyes, one of inexperience and desperation.

My body felt sated, almost. Full. No raging hunger. If this was a normal human, I’d still be famished, even if she was a virgin.

“Done,” she confirmed, shakily rising to her knees.

I laid back, my cock rising far too high. Yet, she didn’t falter, she dropped a little kiss to my cockhead, licking up the seam, and then climbed my body. Her own personal tree.

When she reached my chest, she paused, her wet cunt coating my chest like a paintbrush, getting her cream everywhere. She marked me in her own way, sliding her release all over my pecs and nipples. I’d save the taste for later and I couldn’t say I was disappointed.

Gripping her hips furiously, I dragged her to my waiting mouth. Her squeal of surprise was silenced as I entered her with my tongue.

She wiggled atop me as I held her ass against my chin. My tail had a mind of its own, stretching toward her spine. It pressed against her delectable back dimples and then slid down. Chills broke out across her body. My tail loved the feel of her sweat, the wetness touching it as it caressed her. It seeped into my pores, almost like an aphrodisiac. I didn’t understand the way she made me feel, but it dug beneath my skin.

When it hit the crease of her ass, it dipped between, teasing, and my little human loved it. She arched back, pushing toward my tail like it was a cock to fill her.

It could be; it secreted liquids when needed for lubrication. She rode my tongue and I lengthened it to flick her slit as I teased her hole with my tail. She moaned and I kept my pace. Her little pants and mewls had me near combustion.

Pressing against her back entrance, I thrust hard, feeling myself coat her and stretch her rim. She cried out and I sucked her clit into my mouth, distracting her from the pain she felt.

Wetness soaked my chin as she let out little squirts. I continued sucking, nibbling, and when my tail finally breached her hole, she came, her entire body giving out as she released a heady yell.

She humped my face, and I reveled in her bliss, letting her purple tendrils play with my gold ones. After she came down from her high, I slid her down and entered her with my tail still inside her ass. My cock didn’t need much to come and I felt my body shudder after a few thrusts.

She fell asleep as my cum spilled out. My body felt entirely complete, satisfied. I held her to me, my cock still hard and inside her, yearning for more.

She was an enigma. Her sex energy—unlike others—didn’t dwindle. I’d heard fae could sustain this much after incubuses sucked from them, but she was *human*.

I wanted answers but I didn’t have time to find any before this night ended and she had to go back to her world.

CHAPTER FIVE

Aegan

The Woods of Gnéasha were not haunted as the humans believed. They called this place Dalphenia, but that was a human name. This place was anything but earthly. It was owned by the fae realm. Our doorway, the entrance to our world. We liked the deeper areas, not too close to the humans but also not too near to the gate where the hynéshs were either.

You finally dropped that wall, Viantra mused, referring to the one I put up so she couldn't communicate with me. *She didn't last long.*

She woke up, I offered instead. Along with not being able to withstand this much draining of sex energy, they never woke up. I liked it better that way. Their pleasure wasn't my concern, their bodies were my only need.

Really? She had a lot of meinshine.

She's asleep once more, but she was awake when we fucked.

What if she's cinniúint? I wondered that too, but it was a tall tale. No one believed in this—this mated connection. In Darchon, sure. There was a place for souls and destiny. On the outskirts, where no one could enter, no.

Can't be. We're not in Darchon. We're on Earth.

We're in the Gnéasha, Aegan. Nothing is off-limits here.

My body pulsed with the idea that she could be a cinniúint. My fated. That would mean she was not only mine, but made *for* me.

How could it be?

I don't know, but the sun is rising. You need to bring her back to me so we can wake up next to each other.

I growled through our bond, hating the thought of separating myself from Drew and her waking up beside anyone but me. *My cinniúint.* If Drew was what we thought, we were meant to be.

No.

What do you mean, no? You can't keep her.

Growling out loud, I felt my pulse heighten and explode with angry pats. "Mine," I said aloud, the proprietary way it came out wasn't lost on me. We had to be bonded. I wanted her to be mine, forever.

Pulling out of her, my cock ached. It needed more. Even being full of sex energy, I needed more somehow. I also needed a shower, to erase her scent, even if only temporarily. Her scent was making my intensity worse, causing me to shake with the yearning to claim.

I needed to breathe and think without Drew's essence on my cock. She called to me, a fucking draw of intensity I didn't understand. All I could think about was her wet cunt wrapped around me as we consumed each other. She'd whimper and I'd roar, taking her with me.

Standing, I went to the shower. The sun slowly rose and I didn't want to be apart from her for long. The cold water hit my palm and I inched it away. My skin felt like it was on fire, a burn I couldn't escape.

Looking at my cock, I saw the red, the intense shade that coated me when taking her innocence away. *Mine.*

Drew didn't know it yet, but she was mine.

I touched the red coating me, sliding my fingers over it. My cock pulsed in time with my rampant heartbeat. It throbbed with need, and before I could think better of it, I rubbed off the red, hurrying to clean myself. I wasn't wasting my last moments with my little one.

I'd be spending them inside her, claiming her, being her mate.

CHAPTER SIX

Drew

Waking up next to no one, in a weird home, my heart startled. Part of me felt calm while my mind raced with fear. It was an odd cocktail of emotions, but I couldn't pinpoint which was strongest. I peered between my thighs, seeing a ton of blood and a glimmering blue liquid that wasn't quite dry. My crumpled dress was off to the side, my underwear and bra out of sight, but I somehow didn't connect the dots for several seconds.

No way.

My body hummed with the realization. I was exhausted but re-energized too. The soreness between my thighs told me that I didn't in fact fall asleep at the party.

The monster with goat horns, a wicked tongue, and delicious tasting spit wasn't a figment of my imagination. The stories, the myths about this place, they were real.

And I'd been fucked by the monsters they told me to stay away from.

Fuck.

Adrenaline and fear should be hitting me, but for some reason, calmness was meeting me too. Like my body and soul knew something I didn't.

It helped me to not scream and freak out, but it was unsettling knowing my body was used and it wasn't a dream.

I stood up, throwing on my dress, scared of what this meant. My thigh throbbed and when I lifted the material of my dress, I noticed the bite.

Holy shit.

It bit me?

I covered it, wondering why it didn't hurt like I imagined a shark bite would. The teeth marks were deep and sharp-looking. I closed my eyes, collecting my breath and nerves, deciding to escape.

Running without another thought other than escaping, I left and didn't turn back to see if anyone followed.

It should bother me, the prospect of being fucked while sleeping like I'd read about, but I couldn't make myself feel sad or disgusted. I felt *good*. Alive.

The way everything felt full of life and amazing helped me run all the way back to my car. I didn't look for Vee, I didn't wait. Did she know about the monsters? Should I tell her?

I'd spent the night with a monster in the woods, and I liked it.

THE END

To be continued...

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Relaxation, vacation, and...

Monsters?

After taking a nature walk during her much needed vacation, Erica is lead to two monsters who have been buried in the forest for hundreds of years.

Oisin and Talam have been waiting for their mate. The moment Erica steps foot in their woods, they are awakened... Growling and thorny.

No, horny.

The vines of love will bind these three together and stroke the fires of passion. Erica is in for a life changing adventure on her journey into the woods.

CHAPTER ONE

NATURE WALK GONE WRONG

Erica

I was about five minutes into my solo vacation and sixty seconds into losing my mind.

What had made me think that I would enjoy being alone out in the middle of a forest, in a cabin, with nothing but me and nature? I was a city girl. A businesswoman. I liked nice apartments, fancy coffee, and the thrum of humanity around me.

I'd never experienced true silence until now, and it wasn't even true silence.

The longer I sat on the porch listening, the more I heard. The screaming of birds, the weird rustle of leaves. It was creepy because I knew I was alone...

And yet.

And yet I wasn't.

I tried to drown it out, closing my eyes. It was early morning, and I had made some tea, doing my best to relax.

I'd been kicked out of the office for a week, told to get the hell out of everyone's hair and '*chill*'.

I had no chill. Most people feared me. They thought I was an asshole. A raving bitch. I stomped on balls and pissed on parades for fun.

I definitely could live up to expectations. There were times that owning my own magazine company required me to do all of those things. At the end of the day, though, I just worked hard.

Most women didn't even think of me as a bitch. It was the men that I had to talk over to make a point that did.

I blew out a sigh, trying my very best not to let my thoughts spiral. I was here specifically not to deal with corporate bullshit. Plus, the cabin, although isolated, was absolutely stunning.

It was one of those glamping ones with a glass dome. I'd definitely spent way more than I should have to stay for a week, but...Also, who cared? I'd be able to see the stars tonight, and while it frightened me slightly to be this damn alone, I was looking forward to seeing the night sky.

It wasn't like I'd taken time off in...

Five years?

"Fuck," I sighed, sucking in a steamy sip of my brew.

They were right. I needed a break.

A shuffle of leaves in the woods had me tensing, and I stared to my right, wishing I had laser vision so I could see what was moving.

Weird.

Silence followed, along with the sense that I was being watched.

I was making shit up at this point.

That was enough nature sitting for now. I got up abruptly and went back inside, shutting the door and locking it.

Locking it was stupid, but who knew? Maybe there was a serial killer out here just waiting for someone like me to show up.

Fuck, hadn't this been a new BnB too?

"You're being paranoid," I hissed at myself.

I had no one to talk to, and that bothered the hell out of me.

Maybe I could read?

When was the last time I'd picked up a book?

I took a moment to look around my cabin again. It was a complete dome that had a walled bathroom at the back with a shower and a nice tub. The floors were wooden, keeping with the earth vibe. Whoever had decorated this place had really gone for modern cottagecore, if that was even a thing.

There was a round bed at the center with soft green blankets, my suitcase at the foot of the mattress. There was a bookshelf maxed out with some smutty-looking reads, a fluffy chair perfect for stewing in, and a little writing desk with mushroom figurines on it. There was also a small kitchenette with a coffee maker and some cooking supplies, and then a small book with some papers.

I still hadn't looked through the book on the counter yet. It looked like a sign-in book.

No. I'd shown up and gone straight for the coffee, unable to shake the grip of my caffeine addiction.

With a little sigh, I picked up the book, flipping through the pages. It was a welcome book with a blank sign-in page at the front. A pencil fell out of the binding, bouncing on the counter. I grabbed it before it fell in the sink.

I had all day to do...things.

I paused for a moment, mentally boxing up all my thoughts about work and kicking it into the '*forget about it*' corner.

I'd turned off my phone, too, making it clear to friends and family not to reach out unless it was an emergency. My mother had argued with me until she was blue in the face about that, but ultimately I'd won.

I was safe out here, I reminded myself.

I scribbled my name on the paper, drawing a little heart and a thank you note. I was this weird forest lady's first BnB customer, and that made me happy.

Also, it wasn't my aesthetic, but whoever had made this place had done a damn good job.

And there was wine in the fridge.

I let out a happy sigh, finally relaxing a little.

I thumbed through the book, finding an envelope with my name on it. I smiled and opened it, pulling out the parchment.

Hi, Erica!

Thank you so much for booking with me! I hope you enjoy your stay in the woods. I thought you might get antsy, so I provided you with a map of the property around your cabin so you can go on a nature walk. The other page has the map, and the book on the writing desk has some fun info about local fauna!

*Enjoy your stay,
Forest Goddess Danu*

Forest goddess Danu? I snorted but still smiled a little. She was a creative entrepreneur, and I loved it.

I wasn't sure if I was brave enough to walk in the woods yet, maybe tomorrow...

I wandered over to the desk, picking up one of the mushroom figurines. It was cute and delicate. I then ran my fingertips over the tome on the desk. It was dark green with gold engravings.

Fauna and Flora Encyclopedia.

Why *not* go now?

I pressed my lips together and snatched the book up, making my decision. I'd take my phone with me in case— but what else was I going to do? I could read later tonight.

A walk and some fresh air would be good, along with confronting my stupid fear of leaves moving.

I downed my coffee before heading back out of the cabin— phone, map from Danu, and grass book in tow. I stood on the edge for a few moments, looking around. There was the direction I had driven from, a small winding road that had been barely wide enough to fit my car.

I fished out the map and left the porch, wandering towards the path behind the cabin. It was almost noon now, and the sun was nice and warm on my back. It was the beginning of April, which meant that the air would have a nip to it once the evening was upon me.

It also meant that everything was verdant and fresh. I found myself juggling with my map and book for a moment, positioning them to where I could follow the map while looking through the book as I walked.

I studied it for a moment, humming to myself. I was going to start on the red path. There were two others, but the red one seemed to be the closest and the easiest to see.

I checked my phone one more time before dropping it into my back pocket.

“Erica, CEO turned mushroom hunter,” I mumbled as I started into the woods.

The trees stretched up around me, the path one of dirt. Where shadows fell, it turned into caked mud that left me hissing as it stuck to the bottom of my tennis shoes.

This was both miserable and liberating.

The path started to descend, the sound of the forest growing louder the deeper I went. Every now and then, I would see a red marker on one of the trees, a promise that I wasn't entirely lost and would find my way back to my glass home.

I flipped one of the pages in my book and slowed my walk, stopping to stare at some green moss on some rocks. At least, I thought it was moss. I scowled, flipping through while I tried to identify it.

Wasn't there an app for this? Why was I torturing myself?

It's good for you, I reminded myself, squinting.

I flipped to the moss chapter. A whole chapter just on moss.

There are over 12,000 known mosses...

“Oh my god,” I sighed.

A rustle of leaves had me spinning around, my heart lurching in my chest. I stood still, listening intently.

I waited for a few moments before cursing under my breath. I swallowed hard.

Either this forest was eerie, or I was losing my mind.

Sucking in a breath, I tore my eyes from the walls of green and started back on the path, this time

with a bit more pep in my step.

The path descended even further until I found myself almost slipping. I slowed, trying to keep myself from falling on my ass. I didn't want a mudslide today.

Or ever, really.

The earth finally leveled out, and I found myself in a small circle of trees. I took another look at the map and frowned.

There was no indication that this little clearing was here.

I held the paper closer to my face frowning.

My mouth began to water, and I frowned as a soft floral scent hit me. I lifted my head, looking around.

Something...

Something smelled insanely good.

A groan escaped me, which then jarred me enough to snap out of my trance.

"What the fuck?" I whispered.

I was now standing at the center of the clearing, the soft grass indented with my footprints.

I looked down and realized that a couple feet in front of me, there was a massive deer skull with antlers that twisted up towards the sky. My lips parted with surprise.

I was a city girl, therefore I felt my curiosity forcing me to step closer to the massive skull. How big was the beast that this thing belonged to?

I leaned down, running my fingertips over the bone. It was smooth to touch until the small splinters and cracks. Green moss clung to parts of the antlers, ones that were longer than my legs.

"So strange," I murmured, standing back up.

This forest was creepy as fuck.

I'd had enough of the woods today.

Just as I turned, the ground began to rumble.

"Fuck," I cursed, stumbling.

I gasped, losing my footing and falling.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I said, not sure there was another word that could accurately express what I was feeling.

What I was seeing.

I rolled to the side just as the earth split further, a figure emerging. The skull rose into the air, only now it was attached to a body.

I feasted my eyes on what could only be described as a forest nightmare.

CHAPTER TWO

SKULLS THAT TALK

Oisin

She was here.
She was mine.

A maiden gifted to me by the goddess. A soul that belonged to me that I could hold in my claws and protect from the world.

Her scream tore through the air as the ground rumbled around us, my body unearthing itself after centuries of being buried.

I'd waited for so terribly long.

Did she know? Did she know about the monsters in the forest? Did the goddess show her the path?

I rose up, a long rumble sounding in my chest as I stretched. I was a creature of the woods, my body made of bark and bones.

I felt my magic flood me, a sense of knowing. The two of us were not alone here. I could feel the life around us, of the animals, trees, and another creature.

One that was waiting just as I had been.

I looked down at her now, finally seeing *my* mate.

Her eyes were wide and the color of freshly rained on clay. Her dark hair fell in long waves, the tie that had bound it up slipping free now.

I ached to wind my claws in her hair and bury my long tongue between her red lips.

"Oh my god," she whispered. "I've lost my fucking mind."

Her voice pleased me. Her fear did not. I cocked my head, studying her with the same intent she studied me.

"I'm very real," I rasped. "You brought me to life. Your touch broke my thousand years slumber, which can only be done by my mate. You are mine, little human."

Her lips parted, her expression one of shock.

A dry laugh escaped her throat. "I don't think so. I don't think we're very compatible." Her voice faltered as she said it, and that's when I caught a different scent.

One that made desire burn within.

I leaned down, holding out one of my clawed hands. She was startled by me, but then I saw the curious glint in her dark eyes.

A wicked little soul.

"I can smell your heat," I said as kindly as I could.

Those dark eyes flashed, and she recoiled from me, glaring. "My *what*?"

"Your arousal. Do I please you, little one? Do you like the way your forest spirit mate appears? Do you wonder what I can do with my claws and tongue?"

The human immediately scoffed, despite the flush of her skin. Her chest heaved as she glared. "No! You're hideous! How would that work anyway? I don't... no. Insane. This is insane."

I lifted my head, breathing in all the scents around. There were two scents that were the strongest — our third mate's and my human's.

It was hard to smell him through her lust.

She was lying. She did desire me.

I looked back down at her, reaching out my hand again. She stared deep into me as I carefully dragged one of my claws through her hair, as to not harm her.

Her breath hitched again, her lips parting. “Fuck. You know what? Fuck it. I’m on vacation. I might as well live it up. I can’t remember the last time I had sex.”

I tilted my head, feeling my cock already harden. She was so incredibly blunt, her words spearing straight through me.

“What does your cum taste like? Tree sap?” she asked, glaring at me.

How could she want me so badly and be so rude?

Before she could spit another insult at me, I wrapped my claws around her torso and lifted her into the air. Her scream left her but then died as I held her in front of my head.

“Do you want to find out, my little maiden?” I asked, my voice a deep growl.

“Yes,” she whispered, her cheeks now bright pink. “I actually think I do. But if I say the word ‘vogue’, you have to stop.”

“Is that your cautionary command?” I asked.

She nodded and then surprised me by reaching forward, her hands touching the bone of my face. She ran her fingertips over the rivulets, pausing to run them up my antlers as far as she could reach. Everything about her touch brought me pleasure.

“I’m going to drink your essence as you cry with pleasure,” I rumbled. “And then we are going to go find our other mate. Then you will be truly claimed by us. Do you agree?”

“I do,” she whispered. “I feel...like a crazy person, but I also feel this need....”

“A thirst,” I said, bringing her closer to me.

Her legs spread, her knees pressing to either side of my ribcage. She was so small compared to my massive, monstrous form. I could feel the heat of her core against me and didn’t hesitate to let my tongue loll out, wrapping it around her neck. I tightened it until she choked and then eased the pressure, all the while staring into her eyes.

There was a wicked glint there. She had dark needs just like me, and I would make sure to explore every single one of them.

“Oh god,” she gasped. “I’ve never seen a tongue like yours.”

Just the taste of her skin was exquisite. I didn’t hesitate to dip my tongue beneath the collar of her shirt, tasting her sweet sweat. I ran the tip over one of her little nubs, chuckling as her body tensed in my arms.

I withdrew my tongue, growling. “I’ve been asleep for a very long time. I may not have as much patience as I originally thought.”

“If you can last more than a minute, then we’re good,” she said.

She was serious, I realized, and that made me scoff. “A minute? Only a minute? Is that all your puny human men can last? I’m talking days, my maiden.”

“Days.”

“Days of fucking you over and over again until you’ve been used so thoroughly I have to carry you to wherever you wish to go. I’ll do whatever you want whenever you’re not riding my cock.”

“Oh fuck,” she whispered.

She didn’t know, but I would show her.

I slowly set her down on the ground. My cock was fully hardened now, cum dripping from the tip. Her eyes shifted down to it, and she let out a squeal. “How will it fit?”

“We’ll find a way,” I rasped, crouching down so that I wasn’t completely towering over her.

I tugged the hem of her shirt with the tip of one of my claws.

“Take these off for me,” I growled.

“Yes, sir,” she gasped.

I fought off a groan, finding an immense amount of joy in watching her strip herself of her clothing.

She threw the fabric to the ground, exposing herself completely to the forest, sun, and me.

I started to reach for her, but she took a step back, shaking her head. I saw the glint of amusement in her eyes now and tilted my head, confused.

She lowered herself to the ground, sitting back with her legs spread.

Now I understood.

I growled in the old language, immediately lunging forward. I needed to taste her pretty pink pussy, to devour every part of her that I could.

“Fuck. Tell me your name first,” she gasped.

My tongue was only centimeters away from licking her.

It was very beastly of me to not have even given her my name yet. “Oisin,” I grumbled. “And yours?”

She let out a nervous giggle. I could hear her heart beating frantically, her eyes darting from my tongue to my claws that were spreading her thighs even further apart.

She was beautiful, every part of her worthy of worship. I would taste every part of her and then bury my cock into her womb. I would take her over and over again, and then we would go find our third.

I couldn’t stop myself. I had thought maybe I could wait for him, but...

“Erica,” she said.

“Erica. My fair little maiden. If you must use your word, make sure to say it loudly. If your mouth is filled, tap me three times,” I growled.

“Fuck,” she whispered. “You’re a fucking forest god....” She shook her head, moaning. “Make me scream, Oisin.”

“With pleasure, my little maiden.”

CHAPTER THREE

DON'T PICK THE FLOWERS

Erica

That tongue...

That tongue didn't belong to a forest god, it belonged to a forest devil. My entire body arched, my scream causing the birds to scatter as he buried it deep inside of me.

I gripped his antlers and moaned as I rocked against him. I'd abandoned every sane thought, every *this is a fucking crazy idea* notion. My nipples were hard, my pussy throbbing with absolute pure need. I was dripping for him, and he was lapping every last drop up like it was straight from the fountain of youth.

Oisin was a name I would sing in my dreams for the rest of my life.

I gasped, my head falling back as he began to rub my clit with the pad of his thumb. His claws were long, but he was careful, the sensuous circles an erotic contrast to the way his tongue was wrecking me.

How many men had I put up within my life that refused to even lick my clit?

Apparently, I'd been looking in the wrong places. I should have taken a vacation a long time ago.

Fuck mortal men. I wanted the forest monster.

I was so close to cumming. I squeezed my eyes shut, gasping as my muscles tensed again. I cried out, an orgasm crashing into me harder than it had in years.

"Oh god," I groaned, still writhing against his face.

He drank everything up, getting every drop of cum that had flooded his mouth. He withdrew his tongue with a snarl, "You keep calling me your god. Are you going to worship me then, little maiden?"

"Yes," I groaned. "I'll do whatever you want," I said, trying to catch my breath.

He let out a dark groan, one that rumbled through his entire body. I was still sucking in air as I studied him, my brain trying to understand how I was attracted to him.

I'd do whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, however he wanted, so long as he could keep making me see stars like he just had.

"I have to take you to our mate," he sighed. "I can't wait. I want to take you now, to fill you with my cum, but he needs us. I can feel his awakening."

Chivalrous. He was going to wait to fill me with cum so he could take me to our—

Fuck.

FUCK.

Other mate?

It finally dawned on me that he meant a whole ass other monster.

I blinked, dazed and completely confused. "Wait...so like...another monster like you?"

"Yes," *Oisin* said.

He didn't give me time to argue. Instead, he scooped me up and sat me on top of his head like I was a top hat. I squealed, gripping his antlers to hold myself steady.

He truly was a beast, a giant. I felt my stomach drop as he began to move, carrying me through the woods like I wasn't a grown woman on top of his head.

I was still trying to puzzle out how I was going to survive the size of his cock.

“Can you smell it?” he asked.

I frowned and inhaled.

It was that smell again.

My pussy pulsed, my mouth watering. I let out a soft moan, heat flooding me all over again.

Oisín chuckled beneath me. “You do, then. It’s enough to make my own cock almost release. If I weren’t saving my seed for you, I would spray it across the trees.”

“Nice of you,” I gasped.

I gripped his antlers tighter as the trees began to condense, the smell becoming stronger. The light seemed to slowly disappear the deeper we went, giving the treetops a bright green halo that then scattered into darkness towards the forest floor. The sound of Oisín’s clawed feet crunching leaves was the only noise aside from the occasional bird song and my heart thrashing wildly.

I’d gone from a cold businesswoman to a monster fucking forest goddess in less than 24 hours, but I wasn’t mad about it.

“We’re close,” Oisín said.

He reached up and lifted me, slowly lowering me to the ground. My eyes widened as I came face to face with his pulsing cock again, and I resisted the urge to touch it.

“Don’t pick any flowers,” Oisín grumbled. “And stay close. I’m going to have a look around.”

“Okay,” I said, swallowing hard.

He wandered away between the trees, looking for whatever signs he thought would point towards our dick appointment.

I looked around, not sure what I could do to help. This part of the forest was a lot stranger than what I had seen outside of my cabin.

I breathed in that heady scent again and fought off a groan, biting my lower lip.

There were beautiful flowers everywhere, I realized, sprouting from the roots of the trees. Oisín had said not to pick them, but he hadn’t said anything about not touching them.

I moved towards one of them, my eyebrows raising as I laid eyes on the biggest flower I’d ever seen in my life.

“What the fuck...” I mumbled, stepping past roots and moving through the trees to creep closer.

It was huge! The petals were a rich violet, the stamen a deep yellow. Slime dripped from the tip, oozing...

Oh god.

I breathed in more and found myself leaning forward, following instinct. Before I could stop myself, I licked the tip.

This was what was causing the scent.

The taste burst in my mouth, and I moaned, heat filling me. I was already naked and found myself rubbing my hands down the stamen and then rubbing it all over myself.

I felt something slowly wind around my ankle and jumped with a gasp. “What the hell?”

The vine tightened around me, causing me to trip to the ground. I turned over onto my back just as another vine came out of nowhere and curled around my other leg.

“Hey!” I yelled.

“It’s rude to touch someone there without asking,” a new voice growled.

My heart started to pound, and I let out a scream. “Oisín!!”

I heard the rustle of leaves, the crackling of branches.

Oisín burst through just as more vine wrapped around me, raising me up into the air.

There was no saving him either, I realized.

I gasped as the vines wrapped around him too, binding him up like they were ropes. He let out a roar, fighting as best as he could.

The ground began to shift, and I watched as that flower began to change and morph.

I realized, a little too late, that the stamen I'd just been rubbing wasn't a flower part.

It was a fucking body part.

Not just any body part. A cock. A pulsing, oozing cock that belonged to a monster that rivaled Oisín in his hideousness.

The vines had completely tied me up now, and I was met with a set of black eyes. The monster moved towards me, his chuckle making me whine.

"So pretty tied up. How should I punish you, little maiden? You tasted me before I got to taste you, and that is a travesty. But you did bring me my other mate...." He drifted off, looking over at the grunting Oisín.

"We came to find you," Oisín snarled. "To release you. And this is how you treat us?"

"Oh, you will release me. But not until I release you both first. She's dripping for us. A little human. As if her pussy can take either of our cocks."

Oisín snorted, and I let out a groan as one of those vines slid dangerously close to my pussy.

"What are your names?" he asked.

"Erica," I moaned.

The tendrils were pulsing around my body now, and I felt the tip of one brush over my entrance, teasing me.

"Erica," he purred. "And you, my beast?"

"Oisín."

My eyes widened as I realized those vines were teasing Oisín the same way they were me. His cock was pulsing, vines wrapping around the shaft and stroking up and down.

"Good. I'm Talam. I've been calling both of you for hours, and you took so long to come. You'll both be punished for that."

Oisín growled, fighting the vines again. "I'm the one in control," he snarled.

Talam laughed, taunting him. "It's my vines around your cock, though, isn't it? I'm going to make our little human ready for both of us. What do you think of that, Oisín?"

"Someone woke up thorny," Oisín snorted.

"Not thorny. Horny. In need of fucking both of the mates my goddess gave me over and over again until I can't anymore."

Talam wasn't fucking around.

He turned his attention back on me. I opened my mouth to protest and then choked as it was filled with a vine, one that oozed with that same essence I'd licked off him.

I moaned, trying to wriggle free.

Talam stepped closer to me, lifting his hand to wrap it around my throat. "Do you want me to stop? Or can I fuck you the way I know you crave to be?"

I wasn't going to say no at this point, so instead, I just nodded.

Talam grinned, sharp fangs gleaming. "What a good girl she is too, Oisín. Let's see how many

times I can make her cum before she takes our cocks.”

CHAPTER FOUR

EARTH TENTACLES

Talam

I could feel both of their bodies, taste both of their arousals as I pumped my vines in and out of my human.

She was beautiful, glorious, and had already done more than I could ever imagine. She'd licked my cock already without any reservation, not even caring that I was a hideous monster.

And Oisin...

I wanted that cock buried inside of me just as much as I wanted mine buried inside of her.

Oisin growled, still fighting me as he watched our helpless mate be taken by my earth tentacles.

I plunged one of my vines in and out of her mouth, my cock hardening at the sight of the shape in her throat. She moaned, her eyes shutting as I slowly pushed another one inside of her.

She was already dripping for me. I watched her, interested to see how she'd react as I worked the green tentacle into her even more. I pulled out the one in her throat, her scream singing through the air.

Oisin groaned. "Fuck. She's ready enough!"

"She's not yet," I said, dragging her closer to me. "She can take more."

I cupped her face now, enjoying the way her eyes lit up with a ferocious lust. She panted as I began to thrust the vines in and out of her, plunging into her heat over and over again.

"So you *can* obey," I chuckled, squeezing her jaw. I forced her mouth apart and leaned forward, kissing her.

She groaned as she took my tongue. I let out a soft growl and then drew back, still studying her.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Good," she groaned. "I want more."

"More?" I asked, smirking.

"I want to taste you again," she panted.

"You want to taste my cock, little maiden?"

"*Please.*"

"Are you sure? You seemed so disgusted with yourself."

"No," she rasped. "No, I want this. I want this more than anything. I want to know what you both feel like. *I need you.*"

Her beg was nearly enough to snap my self control. I smirked and lowered her down to eye level with my throbbing shaft. She didn't hesitate to open her mouth, taking the head between her lips.

My head tipped back, and I grunted. Pleasure began to pulse through me as she licked and sucked, fitting as much of me down her throat as possible.

"She does this well, Oisin," I groaned.

I looked over at him as she sucked me and began to stroke him harder with the vines, enjoying the way his monstrous form writhed. He hated me for taking control, but...

How many times had a big monster like him submitted?

The idea of being the first to force him to his knees was thrilling.

His massive head tilted back, and he groaned, finally succumbing to me.

"Are you going to fuck me while I fuck her?" I asked him, all the while thrusting further into Erica's throat.

She could take so much for a human.

"Are you going to let me?" Oisin asked.

A low purring noise emanated from his chest now, softer than a growl. I chuckled and brought him close to us, moving him with my vines. His body was massive, much larger than my own, but he couldn't fight my members.

His cock was begging for more attention, cum dripping from the tip. His shaft was at least 14 inches with a knot towards the base and ridges along the top and bottom.

"Such a big boy," I smirked.

Erica's muffled cry had me drawing my cock from her mouth, reluctantly— but soon, it would be thrusting inside of her elsewhere.

I cupped her face again, enjoying the wild look she had.

"What do you think?" I asked, running the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip. I wiped away one of the tears that had slipped free, giving her a gentle caress.

"Please," she whispered.

"Please, what?"

Her eyes darted to Oisin and then back to me.

"*Please* fuck me while he fucks you."

I looked at Oisin. "Yes?"

"Please," he snarled, his sharp teeth glinting.

"The goddess is kind. She gave me two mates that know how to beg," I chuckled.

I lowered Erica to the soft ground on her back, spreading her legs. She watched me, her chest rising and falling with breaths. Her pussy was beautiful, dark pink, and glistening with her wetness.

"Look how pretty she is," I whispered, biting my lower lip. I stroked her inner thigh with one of my vines. "She wants to be ravaged and bred by monsters. Isn't that right, little one?"

Her skin flushed, and I sucked in a breath as her thighs trembled, a little moan leaving her.

"I think she wants to know what it's like to be fucked mercilessly by a dick a regular mortal could only wish for. To carry our seed," I said softly.

Her scent of arousal became even stronger, and I raised a brow. Oisin groaned next to me.

"Does our little human have a breeding kink?" I asked.

"Fuck," she cursed.

The way she squirmed told me yes.

"I see," I said, licking my lips now. "And here you were thinking you'd maybe return to your life after this."

This time her eyes flashed, her expression twisting. She raised her head, a glare through the clouds of lust. "I will," she gasped. "I'll run away from you."

"Where will you run, little one?" I asked, smirking. I started to stroke her clit again, this time with my thumb. I then dipped my fingers inside of her, holding them up to my mouth to lick up her essence. "You're lost and dripping with lust...a human in a forest of monsters that will devour you."

I then leaned forward, spreading her legs as far as possible with my vines.

That defiant look lost its edge as I pressed the tip of my cock against her entrance. It was bright yellow, the tip round and soft that then turned into a shaft covered in little nubs. Each one of them

oozed with my essence, a juice that would make her body open to me.

It also made the aromatic scent that had drawn them to me. It was both a means of absolute seduction and a defense mechanism.

In all of my time, I had never truly appreciated my anatomy until seeing my fated mate's eyes widen with pure lust. She should have been afraid. She shouldn't have wanted me or this or even us.

But she did.

"You *want* to be devoured, though, don't you?" I whispered, brushing my mouth over one of her nipples. I raised my eyes to meet hers, but her head was tipped back.

"Fuck. Oh god, you're so big," she moaned.

"That's just the tip, little one," I said, sucking on her taut nipple.

Oisín grunted next to me, and I slowly loosened the binds around him, giving him the freedom he wanted. He let out a dark snarl but ultimately stepped up behind me.

Fuck. There was nothing sweeter than being between two mates, was there?

I began to slowly push into her, groaning as her walls clenched tighter than even her throat. The two of us gasped together, learning each other's bodies.

"I'm going to fuck you," Oisín growled, his clawed hands raking down my back.

I gasped at the slice of pain through pleasure, pausing for a moment to savor it. I had always enjoyed a mix of both and found myself thirsting for even more.

The dangerous games I could play with him.

"Harder," I snapped, twisting my head to give him a side glare.

It was his turn to chuckle. "So demanding. As if I would do all the things I could do to you for our first time. Not with you buried in my mate, *Talam*."

I shivered and found myself giving a harder thrust, drawing out a yelp from our human.

"How does it feel?" I asked, leaning in to kiss her.

She took it, our tongues meeting.

That was when I felt another tongue, one that was insanely long. I drew back from her for a moment, gasping as Oisín leaned over the two of us and wound his around my neck.

Erica's lips twisted into a dirty smile, her eyes glinting. "How does it feel for you?"

"Oh, you think just because his tongue is around my neck, he's now in control?" I rasped.

His tongue tightened, forcing a breath out of me as I began to fuck her. Her smile fell into another cry as I went as deep as I could, stretching her body.

I brought the tip of one of my vines against her ass, slowly easing it in.

"Talam!" She screamed, her voice breaking as she came around me.

I grunted in surprise as heat flooded us, her body bowing up. Oisín and I both watched her orgasm overtake her, her beauty something I would never forget.

"Gorgeous," I whispered, easing the vine further inside of her. "You're so beautiful when you cum around my monstrous cock. You'll be even more beautiful when you're dripping with our cum."

She panted, letting out a choked noise. "I've never cum this much before."

I was about to respond, but my words were drowned as Oisín's cock began to push inside of me.

I planted my hands against the ground to either side of her, hovering over with my cock still sheathed as Oisín pushed in even more.

He was *huge*.

I would need to stretch her a lot more before I was getting even halfway inside of her.

Erica's hands reached up, and she cupped my face, drawing me back into another heated kiss. I tensed again with a grunt as Oisín pushed even more until...

"Fuck," I gasped, breaking the kiss. "You have a knot too?!"

"Yeah, and it's going inside of you, whether you want it to or not. That's *your* punishment for fucking tying me up," Oisín snarled.

I was about to retort something smart, but then I felt the bulge of it.

"Relax," he said, his massive hand curling around my chest.

Erica gasped, her head twisting as Oisín began to thrust.

His thrusts weren't like mine. They were slow, measured, and forceful. He pounded into me, setting a dark rhythm that had both Erica and me crying again.

My cock was close, closer, and closer to filling her up. Pleasure and pain were married together in a twist of euphoria, the clouds drifting over my thoughts.

I leaned my head back against Oisín's chest as he slammed into me. His entire form cast a shadow over the two of us, the three of us becoming a pile of unbridled hunger.

"I'm going to cum," I gasped, moaning.

Within the second, I thrust one more time into Erica and groaned, my cum shooting in hot streams. I filled her, feeling the excess spill onto the ground.

Oisín groaned and then gave another pump, his knot finally slipping inside of me.

I cursed, pressing my face against Erica's breasts. Oisín gave one last cry, and I felt his seed spill into me, his knot a giant fist holding everything inside.

"God," Erica whispered. "This is crazy. But it feels so good."

"It does," I agreed, breathing in her scent.

"We won't let you go, little maiden," Oisín grumbled.

"We don't need to worry about that now," I said. "For now, enjoy the gift the goddess gave us."

CHAPTER FIVE

MUSHROOM PICKER

Erica - Three Months Later

There were people in the world that you expected to do something crazy in their life, but I had never been one of them.

So, naturally, it came as a complete shock to many in my own life when I announced I would be living outside of the city 6 months out of each year. We were taking one shock at a time, so I held onto the fact that I hadn't just met one guy— but two— and lived with the excited gossipy whispers as I went through the process of moving.

I was still a boss lady at the end of the day. I was still a strong ass, independent woman.

But I also had two monster men in my life that knew how to bend me over just right and make me submit. To them and them alone, they had earned that right.

Talam and Oisin had gone through their own processes of relearning the world they had been apart from for so long. It was a culture shock, but it hadn't taken long for them to find other monsters.

Both of them could be overbearing at times. Both of them could be completely unstable, grumpy, controlling...

Both of them were also more supporting and loving than I thought possible.

Our first encounter had been the first of many mind-blowing orgasms and cuddle piles. I smiled just thinking about it, my pussy giving a tug.

I set down another box just as Talam came into the living room, his vines already winding up my legs.

"Hi, little one," he purred, drawing me into a kiss.

When I'd first met him, I hadn't known what to think of his form. He was a twist of muscles and vines, a huge male with dark green skin and a pleasing face. His eyes were completely black, and vines came everywhere from him.

"You're thinking a lot," he teased, giving me another kiss.

"I am," I said, grinning like a fool. "I think that this is all crazy, but it's the right kind of crazy."

"We're all where we belong," he hummed, giving me another kiss.

"There you are," Oisin's voice echoed.

We both turned, and I grinned as he ducked through the doorway. The cabin that we had picked out was large enough for him to walk around without his antlers touching the ceiling.

To actually talk the two of them into living in a 'house' had been a battle. Both of my monsters were from nature and very much had wanted to build me some type of rabbit hole to live in.

Instead, I'd found a cabin large enough for all three of us, thanks to Danu the Forest Goddess.

Oisin swept me up into his arms, lifting me into the air. I wrapped my arms around his neck, giggling as he squeezed my ass.

"I'm happy you are home," he grumbled softly.

"Me too," I sighed, giving him a peck on his skull head.

"Mmmm..."

I narrowed my eyes, knowing exactly what that sound from Talam meant.

He stared up at the two of us, his dark lips twisting. "I think we should break in this thing you call

a ‘mattress’.”

I laughed. “Oh yeah? Is that what you want?”

“Not what only I want,” he teased.

The slow pull in my stomach agreed with him, and I gasped as Oisín spread my legs and a vine curled up against my thigh.

“To the mattress, then,” I moaned.

With that, the three of us barely made it to the bedroom, where I found myself ravaged by my two monsters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hello Creatures

My name is Clio Evans and I am so excited to introduce myself to you! I'm a lover of all things that go bump in the night, fancy peens, coffee, and chocolate.

IF you had the chance to be matched with a monster- what kind would you choose?!

Let me know by joining me on FB and Instagram, or Patreon for **exclusive content**. I'm a sucker for werewolves to this day.

P.S.

Join my Newsletter by visiting my website www.clioevansauthor.com - I won't spam you, but I will offer you fun rewards for being one of my monster loving creatures.



BLURB

Long ago, a legend was born of the resurrecting power of a gorgon's blood. The right half could heal and bring back the dead, and the left half was lethal and a single taste would ensure a one-way trip to the underworld.

Mortals saw us as nothing more than monsters to be hunted and bled dry. I endured the attacks for years, but when my sisters were taken from this earth, I grew vicious and vengeful. One of the gods exploited my pain and turned me into a weapon of death. My body and blood were infected with the god's twisted magic and I became the beast the humans believed me to be. Alone and lost, I retreated to Elgin Wood, the last home I'd shared with my sisters. Yet men still came for my blood, not knowing I'd lost the power they sought. The monster they found was nothing like the legend, and before they could take a drop from me, I turned them all to stone. Fifty immortalized men should've been enough to deter any man, but the twins that were hired to steal my blood ventured into my forest with a desire for darkness. I was willing to play a game of poison, if they were.

STORY NOTES

This story contains dubious situations with fang/venom play, sounding, and light bondage.

CHAPTER ONE

Malik

I peered into the gaping maw of the stone man in front of me. His features were eerily lifelike, despite being frozen and calcified. Tilting my head, I examined the pleading eyes that complemented his suspended scream.

There was no final rest or peaceful passing for this man. His legacy was a tragic kind of immortality, the sacrifice he'd made long forgotten. He would be remembered not by name but as one of the fifty that flanked the entrance to Elgin Wood.

It was a macabre view as I stepped back and took in the seemingly endless row at the edge of the tree line. A multitude of expressions—most contorted in agony or despair—had been captured by the dark magic we would soon face. The beast we'd been sent to find, the creature that lived deep within the forest, had forced these statues to stand sentry and ward off any foolish humans who dared cross the threshold into her domain.

My brother and I were both daring and foolish. "It's not too late to turn back," I said, facing Dayton.

He was curiously inspecting one of the shorter victims, wearing an entirely inappropriate smirk. "You want to find her as much as I do," he said, taking a step forward instead of facing me. Our employer, Mr. Sidorov, had warned us not to tamper with them, but Dayton just couldn't help himself. He moved to nudge the man, and the instant his boot connected with the figure in front of him, it was reduced to dust.

"Shit," I said, jumping back to avoid the billow of smoke. It would've felt strange standing in the path of his disintegrating remains.

We both stared in awe as we witnessed firsthand the reason for the random gaps among the fifty. *Forty-nine, now.* These adamantine monstrosities that had survived decades of weather exposure were doomed to nothingness at any kind of human disturbance. The victims' families had discovered that the hard way.

Days after the men had ventured into the deadly wood, they would mysteriously appear among the others as a petrified likeness. Any hope of moving them, returning them to their families, was lost when one touch could decimate them.

Dayton shook his leg to rid himself of the thin layer that had gathered on his pant leg. *Idiot.* His efforts were dismal, and he only transferred the film to his palms when he smacked at either side of the material.

I shook my head and lifted a hand to smooth back a perpetually errant strand of hair. "I'm not saying I'm not curious. I'm just worried you aren't taking this"—I swept my hand over the statues—"more seriously."

"On the contrary, brother,"—the corner of his mouth twisted up in a devious smile as he bent to wipe his hands along the grass—"I'm equally concerned about our fates at the hands of this creature. But there's no stopping me now. And I don't believe for one second you want to turn back." He straightened and raised a skeptical brow. "This is another challenge for you."

He wasn't wrong. I was more intrigued than ever to experience the monster that awaited us at the end of this path. Dayton's risk-taking behavior had led us on more than one mad or life-threatening mission. But losing most of our family had left us decidedly empty, and there was no denying the thrill

I got from following my brother on his adventures all these years.

Dayton took out the weapon at his hip. “So, are you up for it?” He checked the magazine, cocked the pistol and flipped the safety on before facing me for an answer.

“I’m by your side, no matter what.” I shrugged. “I was just making sure you’d considered the possibility that you may end up as a bird’s new favorite perch.”

Dayton wrapped a hand around my shoulder and crushed me against him. “Don’t worry, Mal, I won’t let the big, scary beast turn us into glorified lawn ornaments.”

I shoved him away, and he chuckled as he secured his trusty knife at his right ankle, checking the small revolver holstered at his left on the way up.

A few more rounds can’t hurt. Dayton smirked as he eyed the handful of bullets I grabbed out of a case in my backpack, slinging his own over his shoulder as he waited for me to load a spare magazine.

Once I’d found space for the extra ammo in one of my pockets, he nodded firmly and took off past the forty-nine warnings, taking his first steps into her forest. “Let’s go meet our monster.”

“Don’t do it,” he’d pleaded. “Save yourselves, for God’s sake. You don’t know what you’re in for. The statues may look menacing, but they’re a merciful end. What you see will haunt you, tear your mind apart from the inside.” His body had shaken worse with each word. *“Every time I close my eyes, I see all of hers staring back at me. I’ll never be free of her. The worst thing she could do was let me go.”*

His words played in my mind as Dayton and I stared out across the clearing. We’d interrogated Sidorov’s man for hours to arm ourselves with intel so we knew what to expect, but his mind was weak and fractured from his time in the forest. It seemed mental torture, not another threat, was what the monster had envisioned when she’d let him escape.

Milky fog hung like a thick layer over the dewy grass, but I could make out our goal in the distance.

“How inviting,” Dayton joked as he started for the maze at the far end of the field.

The atmosphere clearly had his veins flush with adrenaline. There was something entirely different running through mine—something darker and dangerously enticing. A phantom touch danced through my body, and I fisted my shirt to try to trap it. It was as though my broken soul could hear the sound of her evil one and wanted nothing more than for me to find her.

Snakes. Poison. *A slow death.* Paralyzing fear. Maybe a petrifying gaze or two. Wings and claws, apparently. That’s what we’d elicited from our in-depth questioning. And the man hadn’t even made it through the maze.

I loosened my grip and let out a soft chuckle as I caught up to Dayton. “A challenge, indeed.”

There was only silence as we walked between the statues into the first layer of the maze. Time seemed to stand still, the cloud of fog moving over us slow enough to make me think light would

never come.

I knew Dayton noticed these abnormalities too, but it took more than silence to bother him. “Right or left?” He inspected both options before facing me.

“I thought you might say that.” I smiled and reached into my pack.

“What is that?” he asked as I clipped the little bag to my belt. I stretched the drawstrings and thrust the bag in his direction.

“Our breadcrumbs.”

He peered in at the tiny neon orange beads I knew he recognized.

Underneath his incredulous expression, I knew he was fuming. “You didn’t.”

“The idea came to me last minute, and we had nothing else.”

“So you massacred my favorite rifle rest?”

Dayton was very particular about his setup at the range, and the weighted bag I’d stolen from was his lucky charm. “I didn’t take that many,” I assured him. “And I sewed it up when I was done. You’ll just have to pin your targets a little lower now.” I couldn’t help but laugh at his overreaction.

His murderous gaze wasn’t a shock.

“Don’t tell me this wasn’t a brilliant plan. And they’re biodegradable,” I added with a wink.

“Get fucked, Malik.” He spun on his heel and stormed off down the left corridor.

“Wait!” He stopped but didn’t turn around. “Take some beads.” I held out a hand, and he just reached back with an open palm, took his breadcrumbs and then continued into the maze.

I smiled at his retreating form and made for the opposite direction, sprinkling a path of tiny, environmentally conscious, bright orange beads as I went.

After my third dead end, I doubled back to the entrance and made my way down Dayton’s route. A few minutes and another dead end later, he yelled.

“Malik!” I heard again, and a wave of panic rushed through me as I raced down another corridor toward his voice.

I rounded a corner and found myself facing a floor of hissing red snakes. There were varying shades of red—deep crimsons, dull maroons, blood reds. Some rose and assessed me from afar, while others slithered forward to attack. I drew my dagger and put down the ones that made any move to strike, not entirely shocked that their magical bodies vanished before my eyes.

I pushed forward and slowly began to make a dent in the small reptiles blocking my way to Dayton. But while I was focused on the threats at my feet, a thin cobra leaped out of the hedge at my side and latched onto my shoulder, its fangs easily puncturing my skin through my shirt.

I gripped the snake behind its jaw, forcing it to release, but not before it delivered a potent dose of venom into my veins. My arm tensed and I dropped the creature, helpless to move as the poison surged through my body. The initial sting and icy rush eventually receded and I regained control. I noticed the snake climbing its way up my leg and shook it off before it could double the dose.

The rest scattered and hid when Dayton’s gun went off. I ran to him through the path they’d cleared and found him facing his own reptilian army. Most were frozen in the wake of the gunfire, but a few were clamoring to sink their teeth into him.

I cut my way to him, but he had fangs in his leg before I could slice the first snake from his body. He sucked in a breath as he experienced the invasion of venom.

My attackers returned with a new sense of vigor and we stood back to back as we prepared to fend them off. I blinked back the haze pulling me under and felt my brother shaking his head as the fog

descended on his mind too. There were no residual physical effects from the snake venom, but my mind was being battered with a wave of dark emotions—the predominant feeling of terror seeping into every corner of my consciousness.

This level of fear, although synthetic, wasn't unfamiliar to me. But the feeling of her magic caressing my mind had my body tensing and my heart racing. I sensed her through the invading touch—she glanced over my worst nightmares, paused as she explored memories of Dayton and I, and finally settled in my dark thoughts. I could swear I heard a soft laugh before she amped up the fear.

I doubled over at the overwhelming force of it, hearing Dayton's crazy laugh as he experienced her influence. I looked over as he shouted to the sky, grinning devilishly as he dove into the fray. He'd swiftly dispatched ten snakes before I stood up.

I hesitated to lift my blade. There were maybe five times I could remember being backed into a corner by fear, and each time ended badly...for everyone else. My mind didn't respond well to terror like this, and apart from the five I knew, there were other times that had me blacking out in a murderous rage.

Fear didn't debilitate me, it turned me into a cold-blooded killer.

A moment later, I raised my knife and smiled at her efforts, no longer concerned with what I might become. She did this, and I was only happy to show her the rest of my darkness.

CHAPTER TWO

Stheno

“It’s not a maze, it’s a labyrinth,” one of them said as they pushed through the hidden door to the central layer. I watched through the eyes of a snake I’d sent away long before they could destroy it. It hadn’t been easy creating each animal and imbuing them with that kind of targeted magic. I rolled my eyes but found I wasn’t truly bothered.

I was impressed. They’d decoded my message at each layer’s entrance and easily sacrificed their own blood when required. I’d been more than a little entertained when they snuck past the first wave of brass statues, and I even laughed when they’d had to outrun the next. And all of this was after their thrilling encounter with my snakes.

Each of them had experienced a uniquely deadly reaction to my venom, one I’d never have predicted. I hadn’t dared interfere and had made sure my watcher snake hid well so I could take in the full glory of the vicious warriors making their way to my sister’s garden.

“You don’t know what you’ve gotten yourselves into, boys.” I shook my head as I watched them solve my last puzzle, unlock the entrance through Medusa’s fountain and slip into the tunnels underneath the labyrinth.

While I waited, I pondered the possibilities having them in my lair would bring. “I could add them to my collection here in the garden.” I laid a hand on the shoulder of a statue to my right. I tapped his chin as I spoke to his stony face. “They are just too beautiful to put with the others and risk some silly human touching them.”

I spun on my heel and made my way to a taller statue, looping my hand through the crook of his elbow and resting my head against his arm. “I could keep them forever, and I wouldn’t have to worry about that pesky mortality.” I looked up and sighed at my listener. “Then I’ll be treated to more of these scintillating one-sided conversations.” I stepped away and slumped down onto my cold and comforting bench.

“Decisions, decisions.” I sat up and grinned evilly as a thrilling thought popped into my head. “Maybe they like games.”

They emerged cautiously at the top of the stairs, weapons poised and ready for the next threat. I glided closer, but the rustle of my wings gave me away and the brothers lowered into a predatory stance. I cocked my head and grinned at their antics.

From a few feet away, I could study the brothers’ features more closely. The one on the left held a long dagger, his other hand out in preparation for the coming *fight*. His shoulder-length blond hair matched his twin’s, save for the lighter strand that fell over his eyes. A jagged scar stretched from his ear to his chin, and the evidence of agony on his otherwise perfect face excited me.

His brother was the same height and build, six-foot four with evenly toned muscles, but dark ink covered the arms that pointed his weapons. He held out a gun and knife, and his dark, enticing lips were parted slightly as though he were breathing in the threatening energy surrounding them.

They were a sight to behold, and a part of me was elated at the idea of trapping these two gorgeous men and having my way with them.

But there was another part of me that wanted to torment them and drag out their deaths for days because they'd dared to face me like cowards. I shook off my anger at the sight of their covered eyes.

"What a shame," I sighed and made my way over to the blindfolded brothers. "It's been three hundred years since anyone had the opportunity to step foot inside my sister's garden, and you don't even care to look."

They'd turned at the sound of my voice and pointed their weapons at me. If I hadn't been so displeased by the material covering their faces, I would've been impressed by their blind aim.

They stood still, waiting for the slightest sound to paint a better picture. To a human, a twitch of muscle here and a silent inhale there would mean nothing, but to me, their leashed power was palpable. I wouldn't make the mistake of treating them like my other victims after seeing the havoc they'd wreaked in my labyrinth. But they were still just humans, and they were out of their depth.

"The beauty of this place deserves to be appreciated. It's the least you could do after your day of trespassing." I thought I'd done a reasonable execution of calm and rational, but these two were perceptive. Their knuckles turned a little whiter around their weapons as they picked up on the poison that dripped from my words.

The corners of my mouth turned up at the idea of subjecting them to the other venomous parts of my body.

I rushed forward and slipped between the knife and gun, speaking right against the tattooed one's mouth. "Allow me to be clearer," I said and darted out of his reach when he swept his blade in a dangerous arc. "Take off the blindfolds. Now."

Neither of them made a move to remove them. I shook my head at their foolish defiance.

"If I wanted you dead, there would be little you could do to stop me. So covering your eyes with a flimsy piece of cloth was decidedly pointless. I don't need to look into a man's eyes to turn him to stone. I simply prefer to peer into his soul as I immortalize him."

"Then why are we still breathing?" My brows lifted at his gall.

"Your efforts with my puzzles intrigued me." I tsked. "But you're quickly losing your luster."

"Did you let that man escape to torture his mind?" Whatever I expected him to say, it wasn't that. I didn't hesitate. "Yes."

The barrel of his pistol dropped as he lowered his hand. "Why?"

His twin had raised his blade higher at his brother's brave questions. The frown above his black blindfold and the cautioning "Dayton" he whisper-yelled told me this wasn't the first time he'd had to prepare for the consequences of his brother's curiosity. I found myself smiling at their dynamic.

I was doing more of that than usual around these two.

I shook off that thought and turned back to the inquisitive twin. "For longer than you've been alive, men have been hunting me. And those who've found me have treated me like an unintelligent, monstrous beast incapable of civility and only deserving of the most barbaric treatment. I don't feel remorse for what I did in response to their hate. You're alive because I'm allowing it, but don't make me regret letting you into this sacred place. I have done far worse than turn a man to stone, and those fools at the edge of my territory are but a fraction of the men who've sought my blood, as you do now."

They don't deny it.

The quiet one spoke up this time. "Why go through the trouble of petrifying them, if having them not return would serve the same purpose? Provide the same deterrent?"

“Would it?” I asked, genuinely interested in his opinion. “Having all the men disappear instead would only invite more investigation.”

The wary brother cocked his head at my general position. “I see your point.”

“In any case, of the multitude of punishments I’ve carried out over the years, I can assure you a stone statue is some of my kindest work.”

The one named Dayton inhaled sharply, and I spun around him so I could lean in from behind.

“I admit it perpetuates the legend, and I could probably afford to leave my collection at two hundred and...” I nudged the side of Dayton’s boot and laughed “...forty-nine for the foreseeable future.” I leaned down to whisper in his ear. “But sometimes I’m not strong enough to resist.”

His head dipped to the side as he exposed more of his neck to me.

“It’s my secret addiction,” I admitted, loud enough for his brother to hear.

“Which part?” Dayton asked. Whether he was being curious or deceptive, I wasn’t sure.

“The end. Past the point of no return. Where the attackers, the trespassers, the rapists, the scientists”—I couldn’t help my raised voice as I remembered why they were here—“the mercenaries...where they are all reduced to an abhorrent waste of space.” I moved away, distancing myself. “What you believe me to be.”

“We don’t—”

I cut the quiet one off before he could manipulate me further. Were they that stupid that they hadn’t figured out how far into the deep end they’d wandered? I was only happy to explain the gravity of their predicament. “Two more won’t disrupt my collection too much. And I don’t have any male twins in my garden,” I said conversationally, rounding the other brother. “I might even stretch it out. Men have screamed their voices away in the time it’s taken for me to get from the tips of their fingers to the flesh of their hearts.”

“Can’t say it’s the end I envisioned for myself,” Dayton joked. “You did warn me, Mal.”

I faced Mal and his eyes seemed to stare right through the blindfold into my own. I couldn’t stop myself from stepping forward and tracing the material covering his face. His hand snaked out and locked me in before I had the chance to blink.

I sensed him reaching for the wing he’d grazed when he grabbed me. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” I warned, my face inches from his. “Or that,” I added when his blade at my side twitched imperceptibly toward my skin.

There was barely any space between us when he leaned forward to speak against my lips. “What would you like me to do?”

I don’t know what compelled my next words. “I’d like you not to move, mortal.” His hard chest froze against mine as he held his breath.

His obedience didn’t last long as I closed the gap and pressed my lips to his. His dagger fell to the floor and the next moment his hand was around my neck, his fingers entangled in my curls. The arm at my waist tightened, and I couldn’t stop the moan that escaped as he bit into my lower lip and traced over the movement with his tongue.

I didn’t notice I had my claws in his shoulders until he gasped around my mouth in pain. I moved to step away, but he simply pulled me back, hungrier than before. I was helpless to stop his hand at my wing now, his tongue slipping into my mouth and overriding all sense. He delved into the white feathers and a white heat shot straight to my core, my claws digging into his flesh again as he tore another moan from me.

He groaned into my mouth in response, and I was no longer concerned about the damage my hands would do. If anything, I wanted to be rougher if there was a chance he would make that sound again.

“If you wanted a kiss, you should’ve said so, sweetheart,” Dayton interrupted, apparently having heard the sound of our lips mashing together.

I reluctantly broke the connection, and Mal was forced to let me go, his arms no match for my strength.

“There is nothing human about the way you touch a woman.” I narrowed my eyes at the man in front of me. “I find myself with a deep desire to kill whoever taught you to kiss like that.”

“I assure you your lips are the only ones mine will remember,” he said breathlessly.

I raised a brow and fought back another smile. “You have a way with words. Seems that mouth of yours has more than one use.”

“I can show you a few more?” he asked mischievously. Apparently not so quiet.

“Tempting as that is”—I picked up his knife and he sucked in a breath as I ran it across his cheek and down the center of his lips—“these blindfolds have become altogether tiresome, and I see no reason to keep you alive any longer if you’re too weak to even look at me.”

“How can we trust you won’t turn us to stone the minute we take them off?”

I didn’t even bother with a response. I marched up to Dayton, slipped his brother’s knife under the blindfold at his temple and cut it off. I turned to do the same to Mal but found his was already discarded and his bright blue eyes were staring straight into mine. I spun away from his penetrating gaze to address his brother.

“Now open your eyes before I remove them altogether.”

CHAPTER THREE

Dayton

“Fuck me, you’re beautiful,” I blurted. My eyes raced over every inch of her, trying to take in her ethereal beauty before the dream dissolved. Her hair flowed in crimson waves down to her waist and her skin shimmered as though it were dusted in gold.

I stumbled back a step as I took in her stunning white wings. She had them spread out and the silken feathers at the tips reached for the sky. My head tipped back, and I lost myself momentarily in the thought of watching her fly. Her piercing gold eyes found mine and I was locked in her stare as she narrowed her gaze in response to my perusal.

“For the record,” Mal added, “you were beautiful with my eyes closed.” *Asshole*. It was forever a competition with him.

Her lips turned up, but she didn’t tear her eyes from mine.

I stepped forward before I could think better of it and reached for the same flaming red hair I knew my brother probably had his hands in earlier. I’d barely touched it when I felt a cold grip cutting into my outstretched wrist and another equally tight vice tightening around my neck.

“This game of manipulation is not one I’ve seen before, which is why I was content to let it play out. I can’t resist a game. But I don’t like it as much as I expected to, and I see little cause to prolong your fate.”

I didn’t stop the devilish grin I sent her way. “Maybe I can convince you to keep us breathing a little longer.”

“You have little value to me,” she responded flatly. “I don’t see why I shouldn’t kill you now and be done with it.”

I dropped to my knees before her, and my free hand found its way to her hip. I studied the bunching of her dark green dress as my fingers gently felt for more of her. She used the hand at my neck to jerk my chin up, forcing my eyes to face her piercing gold stare.

“I’m not merciful,” she said with raised brows. “So begging will do little to convince me of your worth.”

I chuckled softly. “I’m not on my knees to beg, sweetheart.”

Wrestling my hand out of her steel grip, I leaned down to lift the bottom of her dress.

“I haven’t let a soul touch me in a hundred years.” Her voice was as cold as the fingers at my neck, but she didn’t stop me as the back of my hand caressed her leg from ankle to thigh.

“If I disappoint you, you can kill me,” I said, finding her stunning eyes again.

“You’re that confident?” she asked.

“He’s that good,” Malik chimed in.

Her lids grew heavy, and she didn’t take her eyes off my face as I licked my lips and dived under her dress with my other hand. I smoothed my palms across the back of her thighs and pulled her toward me. She stumbled but the hand at my neck and the other she placed on my shoulder steadied her.

She found Malik over my shoulder. “How would you know your brother’s prowess?”

He answered truthfully. “This won’t be the first time I’ve seen him feast on a woman.”

A small gasp left her lips as she realized I wouldn’t simply be using my hands. Tasting her was certainly enticing. But I had other plans, ones I would soon regret.

My fingers traced higher and her head fell back as I reached the material covering her wet pussy. I couldn't help myself from slipping a finger underneath and running it through her slippery folds.

The distraction of me dipping my finger in, finally pressing into her hot heat, gave me the perfect opportunity.

The blade was at her right thigh just as her walls clenched around the tip of my finger. Damn, she felt like heaven. I couldn't stop myself from imagining what it would be like to have her wrapped around my cock.

Cold claws dug into the skin of my neck before my blade could pierce her flesh. She forced my head back further and twisted her other hand, willing brass tendrils to appear out of nowhere. They grew longer and snaked around my arms, finding their way to my wrists and twisting around and around, yanking my arms from her body and forcing them out to my sides.

"Are you always this careless with your mortality, human?" The question started out soft and around panting breaths, but there was no denying the hard edge it ended on.

"Always," Malik answered for me, an exasperated look on his face.

"Did I get the side wrong? I could've sworn right was up and left was down." When she frowned, I elaborated. "You know, resurrected?" I pointed up with my finger. "Or banished to the underworld?" I gestured to the hell beneath our feet.

She clenched her fist, and the brass bindings tightened. I winced and released the knife.

"Is it that you crave death? Or are you simply dense?" She glared at me, but her smirk gave her away. This monster liked me.

I was jerked to my feet by the magic shackles and as my back hit the tree, her fingers pressed deeper into my neck, the sharp pinch and tickling trickle telling me she'd broken skin this time.

"I can't speak to the first," my brother answered again, "but definitely the second." He shook his head and peered at me over her shoulder. "You're an idiot, Dayton."

I let out a huff. *So much for being on my side, no matter what.* "I figured you'd be on board with my plan, so I didn't exactly think to run it by you, brother."

"Sorry, Dayton." He shrugged. "Meeting her..." She looked back and bit her lip as he continued. "...Kissing her. It changed things." He tilted his head and his eyes turned an icy gray. "That doesn't mean I want you to kill my idiot brother, though."

She hummed and spun back to me. I couldn't help but flinch as I felt her lips at my ear. "You're not the coward I thought you were. That was quite devious, in fact. Few people surprise me, and you two have succeeded more than once today." She leaned back to study my face.

"What can I say?" I said through a smirk. "Unexpected is my style."

"He's not wrong," the peanut gallery chipped in again.

The sudden change in mood surprised me. The whirlwind of interactions we'd had with her were certainly keeping us on our toes. It was unlike anything I could have pictured from the stories I'd heard of this *creature*.

Her claws retracted, and she trailed a finger through the blood at my neck. She smeared it over my skin and then pulled away so she could inspect the bright liquid. "You won't be taking a single drop of my blood out of this forest," she threatened, wiping the blood on the front of my shirt. "And you're going to thank me later for not giving it to you." Her eyes softened as she went on. "It will not grant you the reward you've undoubtedly been promised. In fact, it will likely condemn you." She moved further back, gesturing to the underworld beneath our feet.

“But I’m not letting you run back to him, either.” How she knew who had sent us, I had no idea. “You might tell him the secrets of my labyrinth and then only Hades knows what fate will await you.” Her lips parted and a set of fangs descended, her pupils morphing into snake-like slits. “If I ever do let you leave, don’t think for one second there is a place on this earth you can hide from me if I decide I’m not done with you. I live in this forest because I choose to, not because I’m somehow tethered to these hallowed woods.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not going anywhere,” I admitted. “You have my undivided attention.”

“Well, I don’t trust either of you as far as I can throw you, and I have quite the arm.”

“I can believe that,” Malik said, admiring her form with a slow rake of his eyes down her body and then back up to her lips that were suddenly right in front of my face again.

“You two are still the most entertaining thing to happen to me in decades, so how about we play one of my games? I do love games.”

The brass vines secured my arms at my sides and the beautiful beast pressed her breasts against my chest as she taunted me with her lips.

“What do you say, Dayton?” My name for the first time out of her mouth had my cock hardening, straining against my zipper. “Will you play a game with me?”

“That depends,” I replied, my lips grazing hers. “What kind of game do you want to play?”

“It’s called ‘Don’t Move.’” Not a moment after she’d stepped away, I found myself relieved of my clothes, her magic baring me completely to her lustful stare. Her fangs dented her bottom lip as she stared at my erection. I looked down and saw the bead of precum that had captivated her.

She hummed and made a swift gesture with her hand, another band of metal appearing at my waist and winding around and around my chest until I was caged firmly against the tree.

She spun on her heel and started toward Malik.

“Hey, wait!” I twisted and turned as much as the metal would allow, but there was no way out of this. “You can’t just leave me here.”

“You’ll find there’s not much I can’t do,” she said simply, enjoying the view of me naked and struggling. “Especially when I want something. And, right now, I want you at my mercy and unable to do a thing about it.”

“If you’re going to leave me all vulnerable and alone, the least you can do is come back here and give me a kiss. You owe me one.”

“I do?”

“Malik got one. It’s only fair that I do too.”

“If you’re expecting fair, allow me to save you future disappointment. I’m the furthest thing from fair.”

“Well, you’ve already bound me here. A kiss won’t release me.”

“No, it definitely will not.”

That seemed to convince her, and she returned to breathe the question into my ear. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“Hell yes.”

“Your brother only got a taste. Maybe I should show you a real kiss.”

I didn’t have the opportunity to answer a desperate “yes” when her mouth pressed into mine. There was no easing into it as I kissed, sucked and bit at her unnaturally soft, pink lips, taking out my jealousy on the only part of her she was letting me touch.

She laughed lightly and her golden eyes locked onto mine as she worked her tongue into my mouth. I could barely keep up, and the thought of her licking her way down my body and lapping up the arousal on my dick had me slumping against my metal restraints, resigned to the delicious torture of her moving in and out of my mouth the way I wanted to do to her pussy.

I tasted the venom only a moment before I felt the pain of her bite.

The familiar, cold liquid seeped into my bloodstream, moving slower than before, and elicited an entirely different reaction. I grew hot and my heart pounded in my chest in response to my labored breaths. I jerked as a sharp ache of pleasure settled at the base of my cock, wrenching a moan and another drop of precum from me. Her fangs only sunk deeper, and she moaned as she released more of her sinful poison. Her tongue caught the liquid that escaped the wound, but not before I tasted the metallic tinge of my blood and the deceptively sweet favor of her venom.

She broke the kiss and leaned back. Her eyes were almost glowing, and they took a leisurely path down my chest. They paused, and she lifted a hand to circle each hard nipple and trace the spaces between the brass vines. The gentle scrape of her claws between the bindings had me holding my breath, a shiver running down my spine. “Your responses to my venom are simply fascinating,” she whispered as her eyes finally landed on my swollen cock.

The venom had made it impossibly hard, and the tip was an angry, purplish color, tilting forward in search of a wet heat to bury itself into. It twitched under her scrutiny and I forced out my breath in the shock of her devious magic spreading up from the base and spreading out under the sensitive skin at the tip. She bent down and blew gently over the top.

“Holy shit,” I cried out as her breath skated over the arousal and left a strong tingling in its wake. The nerves she’d awoken cried out for more, and the teasing burn was almost painful.

The lick of her lips was torture, as was her staring as she followed the liquid as it slid down the side of my dick. She studied every vein, and I was helpless when my hips thrust forward at the feel of her touch. A single finger trailed through the wetness from base to crown. I tensed as she circled the tip and dipped her thumb into my sensitive slit.

She’d somehow retracted her claws, but they weren’t totally gone, and the cold tips accompanied every pass of the fingers that were now focused on teasing the head. Like all the sensations today, it was new. The icy touch combined with the heat of her hand provided a torturous burn. I silently begged her to wrap a hand around me and shouted out when she moved away.

“I bound you and still I’m winning the game.” She tsked and gestured down with her eyes, implying the movement of my cock was somehow under my control. “You’ll have to do better if you want to beat your brother.”

I glanced over her shoulder and found Malik stiller than her statues. She was more powerful than we thought if she knew he was frozen to the spot without having taken her eyes off me.

“I don’t like this game,” I admitted breathlessly. “Tell me it’ll be over soon.”

She turned to Malik and stripped him like she’d done me. Her head spun back, flicking her long red curls, and she grinned devilishly over her shoulder as I tried to prepare myself for the agony of watching her fuck my brother. “Don’t be silly, mortal, the fun has just begun.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Malik

Her claws delved into my chest as she shoved me down onto a stone bench and trapped me between her thighs. She undid the ties that crossed over her chest and around her neck, exposing her full breasts to the crisp air. Her rosy nipples pebbled as she loosened the gold clasp at her hip and tore the soft green material and the strip covering her pussy from her body.

My eyes took in every delectable dip and curve and then I lifted my hands to grip the beveled edge above my head. She smiled at the implied *carte blanche* I'd just awarded her.

Her hands moved down to my waist, and her fingers dug into my sides. Her mouth came down to pepper teasing kisses along my ribs and I was more than a little tempted to bury a hand in the silky curls that flowed over my chest. When her lips reached my nipple, I just barely stopped myself from thrusting up into her wet heat. My knuckles ached from the iron grip I had on the hard surface and I tensed as her warm tongue circled one hard peak before moving to the other.

A sharp exhale left my lips as her teeth gently bit into me while her pussy slid forward and coated my cock in her juices. Her fangs hadn't broken skin, but something told me that was intentional. I moved only my eyes to see Dayton was frozen against the tree, content to watch her torture me, probably appreciating the distraction from his own hell.

My attention returned to the beautiful creature on top of me when she moved higher and pushed my chin to the side, exposing the column of my neck to her. I blinked and then felt the familiar rush of venom flowing into my blood, numbing the initial sting of her bite. A delicious pinch followed as her fangs sunk deeper into my flesh. The unexpected spark of pleasure that originated from her bite spread throughout my body and built up in my cock, making it swell and throb. More of her arousal leaked out, and she slid up again, reaching down to stroke and taunt me with the promise of putting me inside her.

She straightened and grinned devilishly as she licked my blood and the glittering gold venom from her lips. I mentally kicked myself for not holding out longer, but I couldn't take it anymore. I wanted a taste.

I curled a hand around her waist and sat up, not giving her a chance to stop me as I slammed my mouth on hers. She hungrily kissed me back, and there was no trace of my blood, only the tingling fireworks her magic evoked. I tangled with her tongue, swirling over every inch to steal as much of her velvet venom as I could. She didn't fight me and licked my bottom lip to spread the white-hot burn.

She broke away too soon. "And here I was thinking you could be the first to win one of my games."

I crushed her heavy breasts to my chest and my free hand clasped her neck to cushion her head as I rolled us to the ground. "I'll happily suffer through this loss," I said as I thrust myself into her tight pussy, pressing her ass into the ground as I drove deeper.

A soft moan left her lips, but her fiery gaze quickly turned deadly. "Careful, human," she warned, untucking her wings so she could spread them on the soft grass. "I'm not the type to spend much time on my back."

"Malik," I told her.

She narrowed her eyes at me.

“And you already know Dayton,” I added, gesturing to where he was trussed up behind us. “You’re going to want to remember our names so you have something to scream.”

“You’re going to fuck me until I scream?” she asked skeptically.

I pulled out slowly and slid back in one inch at a time until the tip of my cock met her cervix. I would’ve tested her limits if her hips hadn’t stopped me. “All night if I have to,” I said, fully committed to the cause.

“Stheno.” She nodded with an amused laugh. “I suppose you should know my name too so you can beg me to stop when your mortal body can’t handle me anymore.”

Dayton chuckled and then winced as she curled her fingers inwards and the brass bindings tightened. With the little breath he had left, he taunted, “You love your games? My brother loves his challenges.”

“Fuck me, then, Malik,” she said with her eyes still locked on Dayton. “Make me scream for you while your brother watches.”

How could I say no to that?

Stheno inviting me to ravish her was the last thing I remembered before waking up on the soft grass at the edge of the forest. The morning sun was peeking through the leaves of the large oak Dayton and I were under. He was already sitting up, leaning against the trunk with a note between his fingers. I ran a hand through my hair, calming the unruly strands, and shuffled my way up to him. He handed me the folded card.

On the front, in elegant gold ink, it read, “*Shall we play another game?*”

I opened it and my chest tightened as I read Stheno’s words. “*This one’s called ‘Don’t Come Back.’*”

After twenty minutes of heated arguing, Dayton and I began to really consider her motives for sending us away. There was a reason she’d made us forget the rest of our night with her. Stheno had left us here with blanks in our memory and a note that was as close to a goodbye as I could see her giving, so she’d clearly decided to sever ties.

When we’d reached that conclusion, we reluctantly agreed to respect her wishes and walked away from the most beautiful creature we’d ever met. We headed back to the main road and made a pact to never speak of her or our time in Elgin Wood. Especially to a savage like Sidorov. No one deserved the opportunity to violate or hurt any part of her.

We’d known her for less than twenty-four hours, so our need to protect her made absolutely no sense, yet that decision came without argument. We carried on in silence until we reached the patch of gravel lining the highway. Sidorov and ten of his men were waiting for us next to four black SUVs.

Sidorov adjusted the cuffs of his shirt and crossed his hands in front of him as he leaned back against his car. “Did you get my blood?”

His blood?

“No,” Dayton said flatly.

“Bullshit,” Sidorov spat, pushing off the car. “No one goes in there and comes out breathing or sane. Tell me what happened.”

My brother shook his head. “Get fucked.”

Sidorov waved a hand over where we stood. "Search them for weapons. They're coming with us."

"Take us anywhere you like, Sidorov. We still won't help you," I added casually.

He stared murderously at me. "You're going to tell me what I want to know. I will skin your brother in front of you if you don't."

"I'll sharpen the knife for you," I said, knowing there was a maniacal smile on my face. "If you're planning to hurt her, or worse, my brother and I will happily stand in your way."

"See," Dayton started, "we came to a decision about ten minutes ago, and we're sticking to it. We'll do anything it takes to protect her. That includes forfeiting our lives."

Sidorov's face grew redder, and he was fuming when I said my final words.

"We've lived enough for five lifetimes. In any case, you'd never be able to successfully use Dayton against me. I don't have a heart for you to break like that."

"It's true," Dayton shrugged. "Killing me will just strengthen his resolve."

Despite our reasoning, Sidorov was adamant in his plans for torture. We were taken to his compound and thrown into a cell. We didn't utter a word for days as they exercised a multitude of sadistic techniques on us.

But the silence we'd held onto shattered when they dragged Dayton away alone.

I woke up to the sound of my cell door opening. Lifting myself up to rest against the wall, I could face Sidorov's men as they heaved Dayton's limp form into the room. They threw him down on the concrete across from me and made quick work of securing his hands behind his back. The asshole who broke two of my ribs earlier came over and roughly checked my own cable ties before meeting his conspirator at the door.

When I was sure they were far enough away, I made my way over to my brother.

"Dayton!" I nudged his leg with the toe of my boot, but he didn't move a lick. I nudged him and yelled at him and did everything I could think of to try to rouse him. "Dayton, wake the fuck up!"

One of my rougher kicks wrenched a garbled moan from his lips. Scooting closer, I leaned down so I could speak right into his ear. "She needs us, brother."

"Fuuuuck," he groaned, wriggling awake and smacking his lips a couple times to get rid of his cottonmouth.

"What did you tell them?"

He frowned and let out another pained sound as he sat up. "They know," he croaked out. "I couldn't not tell them. Somehow they found out where Lea works. They had pictures, Mal, and they were threatening to..." He shook his head. "I held off as long as I could."

I winced at the thought of my little sister at the hands of these sick fucks. My eyes scanned over Dayton's slumped form, and I saw the evidence of his staying power. Angry red marks and older purplish bruises marred his tanned skin. There were a dozen weeping cuts that interrupted his striking tattoos, clearly some of their more recent work, and dried blood covered his swollen face and ripped white shirt.

They'd taken one look at me and decided I was already broken, so they went after my prettier twin. I knew, even if I hadn't seen how they'd tortured him, the only reason he'd opened his mouth was because they threatened Lea. Dayton was handsome and had a carefree air about him, but he was

deadlier than the fiercest assassin I'd met. He was constantly written off as an opponent, and neither of us corrected any of the assumptions. It was more fun when he proved them wrong by outsmarting them and slitting their throats or shooting them between the eyes with the same weapons he'd relieved them of.

"So they know how to navigate the labyrinth? How to get to the garden?"

He nodded solemnly.

I wasn't certain how long it had been since Dayton had given up the key to Stheno's sanctuary, but I guessed at least a half hour.

"We have to get out of here," Dayton said.

"No shit. Any ideas? They're likely close to the center of her labyrinth by now, if not already in the tunnels."

That seemed to light a fire under his weak muscles, and his resourcefulness had us free and racing toward our monster less than five minutes later.

The first layer had been ravaged by what looked to be grenades, the walls of green hedge destroyed and exposing the cracked gray stone underneath.

The further in we went, the worse the smell became. We had to cover our mouths as the putrid, charred stench reached us from where we stood staring in shock at the corpses of her replenished magical snake army. It seemed the synthetic beings didn't react well to fire, and I was a little angry Sidorov had kept this information to himself when he'd sent us in here the first time.

My mind was reeling as I realized they might use fire to disarm her. The fact the snakes hadn't vanished like they had from knives had me picturing a worse fate for Stheno.

Dayton didn't hesitate when he seemed to come to the same conclusion, and the only silver lining in this destruction was that we got to her quicker.

We easily disarmed the two men guarding the destroyed entrance to her sister's garden. Dayton took their weapons, and they ran before we could say anything, choosing to avoid the upcoming gun fight. We raced through the tunnels and climbed the stairs stealthily to peer over the top step and stare into the war zone above us.

The sheer numbers Sidorov had sent had no doubt overwhelmed Stheno, and I wasn't surprised to see twelve men chaining her to the very tree she'd had Dayton against.

What shocked me was that the being I saw was nothing like the one I knew. Skin that once glistened with gold flecks was now blue-green and scaly. Her brass claws were longer than before, and a forked tongue speared out from the space between her fangs. Then there was her hair. The stunning red waves had morphed into beady-eyed snakes, skin to the ones that'd bitten us in her labyrinth.

The men had covered her eyes in a tar-like substance, but I had a nagging instinct that her eyes matched the red angry slits of the snakes that framed her face. I shook my head at the irony of her being blinded and tensed a moment later when I realized the only way they could have captured her was if her magic was tied to her sight.

"What are you waiting for?" someone yelled. "Get the blood!"

Some snakes were covered in the same black layer as her eyes and were writhing and hissing in distress, while others spat venom at the men with the glass collection vials approaching Stheno.

They were about to collect her precious blood. She stirred at their presence as they reached her.

"If you so much as touch me with your blades, you'll be dead in minutes."

“You’re bound and blind, you filthy creature. We can do whatever the fuck we want to you.”

“It was merely a warning, but I see it was futile. Proceed, human. I may not be able to see, but I will enjoy the show just the same.”

One stepped up to cut her and dug a knife into the skin of her right thigh, the other man replacing the knife with a large needle that fed into tubing connected to the vial. She didn’t even twitch at the prick. She simply waited with a maniacal grin.

“How about we play a game, boys? I love games,” she said, the familiar taunt lacing her words.

“You’re in no position to play games, bitch.”

“I’ll be playing one way or another, don’t you fret. And it’ll be fun. It’s one of my favorite games.” She tilted her chin and licked her lips. “It’s called ‘Don’t Scream.’”

“What the fuck is she on about?”

Just then, one of the blood collectors screamed as his veins turned black and bulged underneath his skin. He dropped the knife he’d used to cut Stheno and twisted in agony, showing us her blood dripping from his lips.

She just laughed. “Who’s playing next?”

One by one, the men were drawn to her blood like a calling, and one by one, they were infected. The glass jars lay smashed on the dirt, the poisonous liquid spilled in dark crimson pools. But instead of staining the ground, the blood seemed to move of its own accord, searching for its next host.

The two of us took that opportunity to spring into action, cutting down and firing at as many of Sidorov’s guys as we could. I froze when a fresh round of bullets flew, hearing Dayton grunt as he was hit. I looked over to him, but he was already slitting the throat of the shooter, seemingly unfazed by the now bleeding shoulder wound.

The closer we got, the more blood we could see had spread from her thigh. It slithered and sang to the remaining men, forcing them to touch, taste, and cover themselves with her life force. Each of them fell victim to its lethal magic, and each of them lost her game. We’d been far enough away that the blood’s hypnotizing influence wasn’t strong enough to detract from our attack, but now we were the only two humans left to infect.

Like she could sense us now that the other bodies were dead, she called out. “Don’t drink it. You have to resist.” She wriggled against her restraints as she said the words, distress clear on the half of her face that was exposed. “Unbind me and I can stop it,” she yelled impatiently as a fresh stream sprang free from her cut.

The new blood renewed the purpose of the old, and the pools and streams of it were suddenly reinvigorated, calling louder than before. I took a step forward, and my mind grew hazy as the magnetic pull forced me to my knees.

My eyes scoured Dayton’s face and, apart from some discomfort, he didn’t seem to be experiencing the same reaction as I was to her blood. “How are you tolerating this?” I wheezed.

“I’m struggling,” Dayton said through clenched teeth, “but I can endure it. Staying still is helping some.”

I couldn’t stop myself from crawling forward to the closest stream of bright red blood. Like it knew I was coming, the stream widened and sped up, hunting for me.

Stheno spoke again, icier this time. “Malik, stop.”

How she knew it was me who was enthralled and not Dayton, I didn’t know. I jerked my head from side to side, trying to clear the fog, but I couldn’t find the strength to move away or stand.

Her next words finally broke the blood's hold on me.

“Malik. Don't you dare die. You have to stop. This isn't your fate. I won't let it be,” she said matter-of-factly. “You're mine.”

My head lifted instantly at her possessive proclamation, and a devious smile lifted my lips. “Yours, you say?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Dayton

The last of the chains fell to the floor and Stheno's claws reached for her face, scraping the tar away from her eyes. I winced as she carved pink scratches into her porcelain skin, but when I placed a hand on her arm to stop her, one of her snakes went for me and she growled and shook me off. She removed the last pieces of the caked black mask and threw them as far away as possible.

I watched in awe as the scratches and redness from the harsh chemicals receded, her body healing itself right in front of me. Her eyelids blinked slowly as she adjusted to the light, and then opened, her glaring red eyes staring straight at me. They were slitted the same as the hissing creatures whose gazes were locked on me as well.

Their attention shifted to my brother when she jerked her head to where he was standing on my left. A few steps later, she was close enough to reach out and touch him. I couldn't tear my eyes away as she ran a clawed finger through Malik's knife wound. He inhaled through his teeth as she went a little deeper, his blood coating her skin. If I hadn't known the touch of her cold metal against my own flesh, I would've thought he was in pain. But his shallow breaths conveyed only pleasure.

He let out a soft groan as she lifted the finger to her lips, her forked tongue flicking out to taste before she sucked her finger deep into her mouth, holding his gaze the entire time she feasted on his blood. My cock strained against my pants, twitching against my zipper as her cheeks hollowed out.

She pulled her finger out with a plop and Malik swayed forward as she leaned in. "I simply had to indulge before I healed you."

She thumbed the corner of her lip, catching a leftover drop and licking her thumb before spinning on her heel and venturing off toward the sound of rushing water. The air rippled around her as she walked, and we were soon staring at her goddess-like golden skin and the back of her silky red hair. She didn't turn when we made no move to follow but yelled back, "Aren't you coming?"

Malik and I caught up to her and walked by her side to the edge of a lake. A large waterfall cascaded into the clear water. She waded in and reached behind her neck to move her hair over one shoulder. She undid the clasp and the brass choker holding up her dress sprung open. We could see more of her back now, but we were rewarded with an even more divine sight when she undid the belt at her waist.

She stepped out of the dress and looked over her shoulder, winking at us as she moved in further. Her gorgeous ass flexed and relaxed as she walked, and she pulled her wings in tighter as she got deeper, but eventually submerged the stunning feathers, the blood stains disappearing the instant they hit the water. The wings seemed to repel the foreign material, and they were once again a crisp white. Her golden skin shimmered under the sun's rays. The scale-like quality was gone, but the iridescence remained.

She'd tamed her hair and the flaming red flowed down in sleek waves, rather than writhing reptiles. The ends were spread out around her, forming an underwater layer of fire between her bright and almost glowing wings.

We stood in awe for a few moments before stripping and making our way to her. Malik was being cautious and held back, giving her space to turn around. But I didn't just want her touch. I needed it.

She lifted her chin as she felt the ripples from my body suddenly behind her. I reached up to stroke

her shoulder blade, gently tracing the wing where it emerged from her silky skin. “I’ve dropped a man from the stars for daring to touch my wings.”

I brought my other hand up and boldly grabbed the arch of her right wing, both hands moving to stroke her delicate feathers. “If it meant I got to fly with you, I wouldn’t mind the fall.”

She sucked in a breath, maybe because of my words or maybe because my fingers were now playing with the bottom of her wings, my hard cock pressing into her back.

“Now, about that little blood show.” My fingers dove between her feathers, and she released a breathy moan.

“I know you like to watch. Don’t even try to deny it,” she replied smugly.

I couldn’t, and she knew it. The “Don’t Move” game had me more turned on than I’d ever been in my life. “It’s not that I didn’t like it. But why do you always neglect me?”

“Oh, I see. Would you like me to taste you too, Dayton?” When she used my name like that, it made me want to drop to my knees before her.

She spun in the water, her wing brushing over my chest and cock as she did. Before I had the chance to fully admire her naked form, she stepped forward. Her nipples grazed my chest and still she stepped forward, pressing her breasts against me and leaving no space between us. My cock twitched, and she smiled at the feeling, using her strength to push further, forcing me shallower. Once the water was at my thighs, she tucked her wings back and dropped to her knees in the water.

Before my mind had time to prepare, her long tongue was licking the water off my cock, the forked end smooth and strong at the same time. Each lick hardened me further, and she coiled her tongue around my length, tightening her grip to the point of pain before releasing all at once. The sequence wrenched a small stream of precum from me, and she repeated the process so she could watch my cock weep again.

Her pleasantly cold claws dug into my thighs and then I heard soft hissing and suddenly felt them licking at the same time she sucked me into her mouth. The soft wetness was caressing my thighs, abs, and all around the base of my cock. The movements got bolder and her snakes lapped lower, stroking my balls. I dropped my head back and groaned as she moved to the tip, her own tongue delving around and around, shallowly dipping into the hole at the top.

My knuckles were aching from the permanent fists I’d been holding at my thighs, and I’d forgotten entirely about my bullet wound, barely noticing the pain of the slow trickle of blood down my arm. Every now and again I would try to take a breath, but I was holding most of my air captive, afraid if I moved, the delicious burn radiating from the base of my dick would disappear. I dug my toes deeper into the sand, bracing for what I could feel was building as she sucked me in and moved me torturously out and in again.

The sensations of her and them licking me all at once were becoming too much to bear. Before I could think better of it, I reached out and grabbed hold of her shoulder, digging my fingers in as I silently begged her to go a little faster.

She smiled around me but did the opposite, slowing her up and down motion while her tongue slid along the underside of me.

“No—”

I couldn’t even finish my protest as she sank her fangs deep into my flesh, holding me prisoner as her venom rushed into me.

My balls drew up, and my cock swelled the instant the beautiful poison hit my blood. She

wrenched the orgasm from me before I could stop it. And then I was coming down her throat and crying out across the water to the long-forgotten deities. “Oh—oh gods—yes—ungh.”

I watched helplessly as she swallowed every drop, but still she licked me off, her teeth embedded as her tongue stroked every inch of my oversensitive cock. Her snakes had retreated, disappearing again into hair, but her hands didn’t leave my thighs.

I whimpered as her fangs receded. The pinch of pain and the feeling that accompanied that release almost tore me in two. Her forked ends gently delved into the holes and I felt that delicious burn again as some of the venom seeped out from the wounds. She simply pushed it back in and moved to the tip. I let out an involuntary shout as both ends dipped in and out of the hole at the top again, leaving behind a trace of venom and tensing up my whole body as it drew a final spurt of cum from me, milking me of everything I had while she watched in satisfaction.

Her tongue reached out, but I staggered back, clumsily splashing and almost falling back as I finally found my voice. “Stop, stop,” I pleaded. “I can’t take any more.”

The grin she was sporting was smug and deadly. There was no knowing what this dangerously seductive woman would do next. She stood and spun away from us, diving into the clear water and disappearing under the rumbling cascade.

I sent a questioning look to my brother but saw his attention was on me already. His shoulders were tense and his erection told me he was likely jealous of all that pleasure he’d just witnessed.

Stheno appeared between us a moment later and handed us each a glass vial filled with crimson liquid.

“I stored some of my blood before Athena infected it with her magic.”

Malik started to ask, “So you’re saying—”

“Blood from either side of my body will kill you. The healing power and resurrecting ability I once had was ripped away by a vengeful goddess.” She smiled sadly but lifted a hand to each vial, guiding them to our mouths. “What I saved is almost depleted, but I can spare this for my rescuers. Drink.” She nodded as we swallowed every drop, and our injuries from the past week healed in seconds. Malik’s broken ribs and his knife wound, my gunshot and bruises from Sidorov’s torture—it was as though they never happened.

“Either of you up for a game?” she asked as we were finishing up in the water.

Malik raised a brow. “Only if you play too this time.”

“I have no problem taking part in this one.”

“Tell us,” I said.

“It’s called ‘Don’t Come.’” *Fuck, I don’t know if I’m ready for round two.* My cock apparently was and stirred to life in the water.

“He has an unfair advantage, seeing as he already did!” Malik said in disbelief, his eyes darkening as she walked out of the lake dripping wet. She turned around and raised a brow at him. “We know,” he sighed, “you don’t do fair.”

“I knew you were smart,” she chuckled. “Will you play, then?”

“I’m always up for a little brotherly competition. And we’ve never played a game like this before.” Malik winked at me. “Might be fun.”

My brother definitely wasn’t ready for her, which made this all the more enticing. “How are we

going to play with the three of us? Are we going to take turns, or...?”

“I can handle you at the same time,” Stheno said, trailing a finger up between her breasts and circling one nipple. “The question is, can you handle me?”

I walked up to her, my cock now hard as a rock as I met her at the water’s edge. She didn’t look down, but she smirked like she knew what she was doing to us. “Sweetheart, we were born to share.”

CHAPTER SIX

Stheno

They followed me into the forest, not bothered by the fact we were all still naked. When we reached the ruins, the real reason I'd built the labyrinth, I stopped at the foot of the stairs and laid a hand on the carved sculpture of my sister, Euryale. My forehead met hers and I closed my eyes as I breathed in.

The death of our younger sister Medusa almost broke us. But the garden we'd created in remembrance of her let a sliver of light back into our dark souls. I winced at the thought of what those humans did to her exquisite fountain, her likeness nothing but a mangled mess of stone.

And then Euryale left me too.

After Athena took her life, I lost myself in a century of death and destruction. When I finally found my way back, the magnificent marble palace had been reduced to a decrepit, broken structure. But there was beauty in the delicate vines creeping up the cracked walls, and remnants of my sisters wandered the halls and floated on the breeze between the tall pines.

I couldn't lose the only part of them I had left, so I built the labyrinth to protect my memories. And it did, despite the twisted legend that grew of the beast and the resurrecting power of my blood.

The demolished labyrinth protected nothing now.

Malik reached out a hand as we climbed the weathered steps and pressed me up against the wall, tracing my cheekbone with his thumb. "We'll rebuild."

"And in the meantime," Dayton added as he trailed the back of his fingers down my arm, "we'll protect you."

Malik jumped in just as I was opening my mouth. "He means we'll stand by your side as you lay waste to anyone who uses this destruction as an opportunity to come for your blood."

I winked at him, satisfied with the correction.

We continued up and into the palace ruins, eventually finding ourselves in one of the surviving bedrooms. Malik moved to the bed and ran a hand over the satin sheets.

Dayton stepped forward to join him, and I spun around before he could take another step. I bit my lip as I used my wings to encircle his naked body. The edges overlapped around his broad shoulders until he stumbled into my space. My wings closed tighter still, and he was trapped as I pulled him close enough to share breath. Dayton's hands leaped at the chance to caress the velvety feathers.

His icy gray eyes found mine. "Are you going to make us forget this time too?"

"You wouldn't have wanted to remember that night, trust me." I frowned. "You've seen what I become, what Athena made me. And I spent part of our night together as that monster, not the gorgon I was born as." I swept a hand over my more palatable form.

"Wait," Malik said. "The skin, the eyes, the snakes?" I turned to face him. His teeth bit into his bottom lip and his eyes raked over my bare skin as though he were trying to bring forth the memories my venom had erased.

My mouth opened, but Dayton's laughter stopped my words. "You're saying the lake wasn't the first time you'd used your snakes on me?"

I shied away from his gaze, but he held my chin and brought me back to his playful grin.

"I'm even more upset now," he said, mirth in his eyes. "I never would've left you if you hadn't made me forget what was clearly the best night of my life."

Malik clucked his tongue. "Then this mess would've never happened."

"So you want me to keep you?"

"Is that a trick question?" Dayton asked.

"My concept of time differs from yours. It'll be a decade before I even let you out of this bed."

"Now you're just forcing us to say yes," Malik added, and then I felt his presence behind me before two fingers stroked an S-shape down my spine.

He tucked my hair behind my ear so he could press a delicate kiss on my neck. "Are you sure you want us, though? Want...me?"

"What's not to want?" I looked to the side so his lips were closer to mine.

"I'm not quite whole," he murmured against my jaw.

"My soul is as stained as they come. And no amount of good deeds will erase the pain and suffering I wrought when there was no one alive to keep me sane."

Dayton slipped a hand around my waist and closed the small space between us. My hard nipples grazed his chest and his hard length pressed into my belly. "Every part of you is beautiful, even the parts that scare us." He leaned forward and stole a kiss.

"Especially those," Malik added, wrapping a hand around my neck so he could bring my lips back and take a kiss for himself.

The corners of my lips lifted at their competitiveness. "A decade will not be long enough to sate my desire."

"We better start now, then." Malik dug his fingers into my hips and pulled me out of his brother's grip, my wings finally loosening their hold. "Get on the bed, monster mine."

"Wait." I held up my palm. "I won't be able to sustain my gorgon form when things get...heated. The snakes and the scales I can control, but the other parts of me... You have to be sure."

"I want to take you like this." Dayton said with a piercing blue stare. "Why stop me if I have before?"

"It's more than just the outside of me that changes." His eyes dropped to my mouth where my forked tongue lay. "It's...well." I struggled to get the words out, feeling my cheeks heat under their attention. "I'm even further from a human woman when I'm this monster." I moved my hand down to my pubic bone. "That extends to most of my anatomy." I backed away until the backs of my wings met the wall. "Having sex while I'm like this might be more than you can handle. Dayton passed out the first time."

He shrugged and met me in the corner of the room. "I'm not at all ashamed that I passed out from pleasure." A hand lifted to my chest and his thumb trailed an electric path from the center of my ribs, over the top of my breast, and up to my collarbone to finally wrap around my neck. "I want you in every way possible and if this is as intense for you as what you're describing for us, bring it on."

I gasped as he tweaked my nipple with his free hand and tightened his grip on my throat. "If I pass out, you have my consent to keep going until you can't anymore."

"You might change your mind later." I raised a brow and scoffed.

"We won't," Malik said simply.

I smirked and climbed up on the bed. Malik held back, licking his lips as I settled on all fours and presented myself to his brother.

I raised a brow at Dayton over my shoulder. "Are you waiting for a formal invitation?"

Dayton crawled up behind me and tentatively brushed his hands over my ass. He grew bolder and

kneaded the muscle, ending with a firm grip on my hips as he easily lined up the tip of his cock. “Gods, you’re soaked,” he rasped and pushed his way inside me.

He inhaled sharply and his grip turned bruising as he felt the first ripple against his length. The tiny barbs that lined my inner walls would continue to bury inside his flesh in waves and deliver small doses of stimulating venom as he moved in and out of me. The initial touch could be painful with the stronger waves, but the protrusions were soft and silky for the most part—only sharp at the tip.

When he’d caught his breath and adjusted to the feeling, he continued deeper and moaned as he was exposed to more of the barbs. As soon as he was buried to the hilt, a fresh wave rushed out of me and all at once, the tiny barbs attached and icy venom flowed directly into his cock, making it swell and throb inside me.

“Don’t you dare make me forget this,” he croaked as he dragged himself back out and my walls clenched, wrenching an involuntary shout from him as the protrusions prevented him from retreating completely.

“And just how do I fit into this? We agreed to a game, after all,” Malik taunted.

“Fuck yes,” Dayton moaned as the silky thorns caressed him through a deliciously deep thrust.

I exhaled a silent scream at the depth. Once I’d recovered, I flung out a brass vine and twisted it around Malik’s forearm, yanking him down onto the bed in front of me. “I’m so glad you asked,” I said. “You can’t feel what your brother is...yet. Maybe I can rectify the situation so you receive your own intense share of pleasure.”

Malik winked at me. “Look at you being fair.”

“Maybe wait to make that assessment.”

“My darling monster, I’m up for everything and more.”

“Very well, then.” I curled my fingers and a thin vine appeared, coiling its way toward Malik’s hard dick. The tapered end reached for the slit at the head, and I flexed my hand, halting its movement.

Malik’s eyes widened as he understood.

“Are you ready, Malik?”

“Yes,” he breathed, gripping the sheets and crying out at the initial intrusion.

I pushed another inch in, watching in twisted satisfaction as more of the gold metal disappeared into his dick. The purplish head swelled and wept around the foreign object as I drove in further.

“Wait.” He had his palm out and clenched his fist when he realized there was nothing for his hand to hold on to. “Just pause for a second.”

I didn’t listen, lost in the feel of Dayton’s thickness coaxing more icy liquid from the tiny protrusions inside me.

“Fuck! Stop, stop, stop,” Malik shouted, jerking his head from side to side while his legs stretched and grew stiff.

His tone gave me pause, and I froze the movement of the brass tendril. I leaned down and kissed the side of his bulbous head.

He let out a soft whimper when my lips left his skin.

“Do you truly want me to stop?” I asked seriously. “I will if you ask now.”

“He doesn’t want you to stop, do you, Mal?” Dayton had stopped his thrusting to peer over my shoulder at where my lips were a hair’s breadth from his brother’s full cock.

“No, I want it. I want all of it. I never imagined it would feel like this. I just need you to go slower. Please,” he added breathlessly, “only until I adjust.”

“Ahh,” he moaned as I resumed the path inward, moving slower than before and adding a twist to assist the invasion. “Yes, oh gods, yes. Just like that.”

Dayton’s fingers gripped my hips as he continued to enjoy the show. They dug into my flesh as I reached the end of his brother’s dick and then started pulling back slower than I’d entered. Before I was completely out, I delved back in, a little faster this time. I went out and in again until Malik was groaning and writhing as I fucked the inside of his dick.

Dayton’s hips thrust forward involuntarily, and that jump started his movements, turning him into a rutting beast that was helpless to slow down. Especially when more fluid seeped out and coated his raw cock.

I looked down and saw his red, wet length moving in and out of me. It glistened with the golden shimmer of my arousal, and I felt it hardening further in response to the magic.

I lifted my head to Malik’s leaking cock and reached out with my tongue, wrapping it tightly around him like I’d done to his brother by the lake. I squeezed him around the cold, hard rod.

“I need to come. I’m so close,” he whispered.

Before he could find his release, I used my magic to widen the metal slightly inside him, effectively halting his cum.

He cried out at the ruined orgasm.

I twirled my wrist and the brass tendril retreated and dissolved into a ripple of air. My lips gently circled and soothed the tip of his cock, and when I was done, I clucked my tongue and turned to Dayton. “Out, *sweetheart*,” I said. “I’m not ready for either of you to finish yet. I want this to last.”

Dayton reluctantly pulled out of me and let out a low groan as the tiny thorns tried to make him stay. When he was finally free, he rested a cheek on my wing and took a few deep breaths.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I said as Dayton started to move back. “I want you both, now.”

“Here?” he asked as he pressed his cock, still wet with my juices, against my ass.

“Yes, there,” I cheekily invited.

He didn’t give me a chance to brace myself as he pushed his mushroom tip past the tight ring of muscle. I closed my eyes and breathed out, and he slipped in further. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d let someone enter my ass but that might have been because I couldn’t think about anything but the deliciously full feeling of Dayton’s cock pushing deeper and deeper inside me until his balls were resting against the wet entrance of my pussy.

I moaned as he pulled out and shoved in again, using my shoulder as leverage to impale me on his hot, hard length.

“Yes, that’s it. Don’t hold back, big boy.”

“Anything for you, sweetheart.” He pressed a kiss against my spine and moved to stroke his lips across the arch of my wing. He spoke into my feathers and his hot breath had me clenching tightly around him. “Get down here and fill our girl’s pussy up, would you, Mal?”

Dayton reached his hands around to massage my breasts and pull me flush against his firm chest. His thrusts grew shallower, and I flared my wings, whining at the loss of sensation.

“Be patient,” Dayton chided. “I’m just making the game more interesting.”

He lowered us down to the bed, smoothing my hair back and using his fingers to collar my neck and hold me firm against his skin.

“Stay,” he said.

My brows shot up, and I turned to give him a piece of my mind, but he just tightened his fingers in

a bruising hold and tsked me. When I was still for a few moments, he released my neck and his hands ran a teasing path down to the inside of my thighs. He parted them to expose my pussy to his brother.

Malik crawled down the gigantic bed, and when his head reached the space between my legs, he stopped and stared as Dayton started moving again. I cried out and snapped my legs together when he made a figure eight motion and drove in deep.

But Malik was having none of that and his hands found my knees and forced them open so he could feast on me with his gifted tongue. I ticked off another divine use of his mouth.

He circled my clit before spearing inside me and tasting my arousal. He teased my entrance with shallow movements, but wasn't deep enough to feel the rest of me. That would have to wait. I wanted him to experience the intense caress of my inner muscles over the most sensitive part of him. Dayton had asked to remember. I just hoped Malik would feel the same after the sweet torture he'd just endured.

"You'll have time to show me how skilled that mouth of yours is later." I reached down and lifted his chin. "Now, I need you to come inside me." I demanded. "And we'll see if you can hold out until after your brother finishes in my ass."

I looked to the side, but all I felt were Dayton's heavy breaths. "I think he's close." I hummed as he sped up.

When I found my way back to Malik's turquoise eyes, they were lit up with a fiery desire, and the next second, the tip of his cock was at my entrance. I stroked my thumb up his jaw, tracing his hauntingly beautiful scar, and when my fingers closed around his neck, I brought his lips to mine.

He chose that moment to drive into me and I swallowed his groan as he encountered the initial touch of the soft barbs. He moved back to adjust his hips and cried out into my mouth as my walls gripped him and the protrusions undulated against his flesh. Leaving was an almost impossible feat.

"Go deeper, Mal. It feels even better to have more of her take you in." Dayton spoke against my ear and the stubble on his jaw grazed against the skin of my neck and sent a tantalizing spark through my body.

Malik shoved in further, resting his forehead on my free shoulder and tickling my skin with his warm breath when he was fully seated inside me.

Dayton loved to watch his brother at the mercy of my body and had paused his movements again, chuckling at his brother's reaction.

"Do you want to forget?" Dayton asked Malik.

Malik's chin lifted instantly, and his eyes met mine with a dark intensity. "Fuck no," he said and groaned as my muscles contracted around him in response.

Dayton shifted under me so he could kiss his way up my shoulder and neck. I tilted my head toward him and his lips caught mine. The kiss was sloppy and our tongues warred as he started moving again. I was deliciously full with the two of them seated inside me, but having them move in and out together was something I'd never felt before.

My subconscious wanted Dayton to come, so I couldn't stop myself when my fangs bit into his lip like they'd done that first day. The release of icy liquid from my mouth, combined with the forbidden taste of his blood, had my heart racing and my wings tensing.

Dayton moaned against my lips and his movements became urgent and erratic as the divine poison spread throughout his body. He jerked once, twice, and then stilled, tensing as he shot his hot cum inside me.

He slumped back and released a satisfied sigh. "I'm so upset. Now I can't win."

"It seems there's only two of us playing now." I looked up with a sly smile as Malik continued to thrust into me with a desperate rhythm.

He arched his back and groaned as I clenched around him, forcing the silky thorns harder against his oversensitive length.

"Fuck if I'm trying to win anymore, Stheno. But there's no way I'm going unless you follow straight after." I gasped as Malik's lips latched onto my nipple.

Dayton's fingers delved between the tight space and found my clit. I'd been close already, only holding off so I could win, so this was pushing me closer to the edge than I'd planned.

"I'll be right there with you, Malik. Deep breath," I ordered as I felt another wave of arousal flow out of me.

The release of liquid was a delicious, toe-curling pleasure for me, and the instant it touched his thick, throbbing cock, Malik came with a garbled moan.

His hot seed filled me, and the feel of it mixing with mine triggered my own release. My shout was muffled by Malik's kiss. He swallowed the sound of my orgasm as Dayton's hand massaged my breast and his other slowly circled my clit.

My inner muscles clenched hard around the two of them inside me. Malik was held still by a powerful wave of rippling barbs around him. He cried out against my lips and released a more forceful jet of cum that hit my cervix and had my back arching from the wicked pleasure.

Dayton's touches softened, but Malik stayed frozen and panting until I finally unclenched.

They pulled out one at a time and Malik let out a breathless whimper as the protrusions stroked his sensitive, softening cock on the way out. The loss of fullness was replaced by the feel of their hands and lips, soothing me as we lay together on the massive bed, my wings awkwardly spread out over them.

The post-orgasmic bliss morphed into laughter and comfortable conversation. The more time I spent with the twins, the more I wanted to never let them out of my sight.

I was going to enjoy watching them learn exactly what it meant to be kept by a *monster*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Malik

“Let’s play a game,” said Dayton.

Stheno smirked. “You’re terrible at my games. You always lose.”

“I won the ‘Don’t Die’ game!” She scoffed like it didn’t count. “Are you saying no?” he goaded.

“No. What’s the game called?”

“Don’t fall.”

I looked up to the sky and prayed to the gods my brother wasn’t serious.

When I looked back down, I saw Stheno considering Dayton with a lustful gaze.

“How do we play?” she asked.

“You mean how do we”—Dayton gestured between the two of us—“play?”

She raised an expectant brow.

“If we don’t fall for you, we win.”

“And if you do, I win?”

Dayton nodded with an ardent smile.

“Why would I want to play?” she asked nonchalantly.

“Because I can promise it’ll be the most fun you’ve had in all your years on earth.”

She narrowed her gaze as she considered, and then her lips appeared to turn up at the thought.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, interrupting their back and forth. “Dayton, this is silly.” I was practically in love with this beautiful being already. “How are we possibly going to win?”

“Exactly,” he replied. “So?” He cocked his head at Stheno.

“I’m not going to start playing fair anytime soon, you know?” Her sly smile widened.

He dropped his head further, baring his neck to her. “Promise?” he asked.

I felt my cock harden in anticipation as she stepped up to my brother and sank her fangs into his neck, locking eyes with me from underneath her long lashes.

I bit my lip and stepped into the fray. “Game on, I guess.”

THE END

Thanks for reading *Poison Games*.

Want to read more? Pre-order *Seductive Liar*, the first book in my dark mafia reverse harem series:
Secrets of Savage.

Seductive Liar: A Dark Reverse Harem Romance

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sienna Varrone is an author of dark new adult romance. She's all about mafia and monsters, and her stories feature mysterious, deadly characters with a ton of spice and a touch of taboo. When she's not writing, she's probably in the lab, living out her other dream of being a scientist.

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ROOTING FOR LOVE

HELENA NOVAK &
NATALIA PRIM

BLURB

The rainforests house many unknown plants and creatures.

As an award winning botanist, I've discovered my fair share. But one more failed expedition and my funding will be weeded out.

My quest to find an elusive plant leads me to an unexpected treasure, one that could change my fortunes forever. The only problem is, I want to keep him for myself, and he feels the same way.

Something tells me we'll be rooting for love.

JAYDA

“3 8, 39, 57, 74...this should be it.” I wipe sweat from my brow and scour the wet forest floor. It’s not raining at the moment, but after slogging through miles of dense foliage, I’m soaked to the bone. The right leg of my cargo pants ripped on a branch two miles back, my shoes are completely covered in mud, and I’m just trying to *romaine* calm. I snort, composing myself quickly and resuming my search.

Aside from the giant ants, which...are weirdly not bothering me today, and thick underbrush, it’s rudely bare.

I crouch, brushing a few fronds of a liana out of my way with a huff.

“Well, this is the last time I look to chatrooms for a lead. Utter waste of time.”

I should have known better. Really. I’m an award winning botanist, with two degrees under my belt and while I might have a thing for stupid plant puns, I’m anything *but* stupid. And to think I dragged someone else on this expedition with me. Elowyn won’t mind, she’s sweet as all get out, if a little jumpy. Which...is why she’s guarding the camp, instead of tromping around out here.

How am I gonna explain this to anyone? The plant is elusive, yeah, and it’s not totally unheard of to follow dead-ends you found on the internet. But seriously. I should have realized when the directions started with counting the number of steps from a dead tree like this is some pirate’s treasure map—what the...

My frustrated stomping splattered mud in an arc, bits of it sliding down my calves but it also uncovered the jagged, purple edge of a leaf. Adrenaline shoots through me.

“Holy shitballs!” Gently, I smooth more mud away until the leaf is fully visible, including the vine winding its way behind a rock. Shaking like a, well, leaf, I give the vine a gentle tug and hold my breath.

If my endless research hasn’t steered me wrong—and it never has—then one more tug should reveal—

I suck in a gasp when the tiny violet and orange flower I never thought I’d see, springs to life out of the center of the vine. This is it. This is really it. The Taunting Thousand-Leaf is real. My triumphant laugh rings out, bouncing off the canopy.

“Look at you, oh my God. You are so gorgeous! Okay, stay right there, let me get my little cup. We’re just going to take a short trip. I promise, you’ll love it.”

Is it weird that I feel genuine empathy for plants? Yes. I own it. It’s fine. But they *do* have feelings.

Never mind this theory is why I’m out in the rainforest with a donkey named Francis. It’s not even my donkey. I’m just borrowing it. But coming back to society with proof that this beauty exists is sure to land me funding. Funding means better research, possible tenure with any university of my choice, and keeping Ellie as my assistant.

The little flower bends to the side as water plops down on it from a branch above, springing back into place as if on its own accord. The water splashes my face, snapping me back to the present with the shockingly sweet taste dancing over my tongue.

“Oof.” I wipe the drops off my cheek, licking my lips. These are far too rare to eat, but I’ve never seen anything to suggest they’re poisonous. “It’s okay, little friend. I know it was an accident.”

I grab the small plastic container and unscrew the lid. I pull out the tweezers and lean in, but I slip in the stupid mud, my foot sliding out from under me. I pitch forward, flailing to catch myself, and as

my knee squishes, sinking further into the muck, the edge of the container slices into the vine.

My future, my life's work, dies right before my eyes. The vine excretes its life force, bleeding out and shrinking in on itself. I scramble to cut the flower free, but I'm too late. It shrivels, and I would swear on the life of Patrick Swayze, I hear it screaming as it does.

It's so real and so heartbreaking. Am I really crying for a plant? I would love to say no. But that would be a whole lie.

"Shit, I'm so sorry." I drop back on my ass with the crumpled petals cradled in my palm, sniffing pitifully. I don't know what's worse—my life's work, gone, in less than half a second, or knowing I hurt this beautiful little plant for literally no reason at all. "I didn't mean..."

Something brushes my cheek, and I swat at it on reflex. I don't even have time to refocus on crying before something touches my other cheek. This time I slap it in place, figuring it's one of the cow-sized mosquitoes they have around here. But it's thin and long, and my fingers follow the length down my cheek. My heart races out of control, because if this is a slug I might physically hurt myself running. Though, it's firm and cool to the touch, not sticky like slugs normally feel.

It continues down my neck, out of slug territory and straight into snake territory. For a moment, my entire body goes rigid, wide eyes locked on nothing at all as the thin length slithers under the collar of my shirt and down my chest, curling under my breast and snaking around my ribs.

I grab at it, a scream building in the bottom of my chest that I barely manage to swallow, but it doesn't budge. It doesn't move with breath, or even flinch away from my grip. If anything, it gets even tighter.

Oh, God, I'm panicking now.

I force my eyes down to see what I'm up against. Gorgeous green, with tiny little leaves that look like thorns but feel like petals tickling my skin. They're... They're vines. Vines just like the one I tore out of the ground.

Oh my God, oh my God.

"Okay," I force out, making myself breathe enough to talk to myself. That helps. A little. "Okay I can get out of this. I just have to use my brain."

Why do you wish to leave?

I startle, looking around for the voice. Francis is very busy tearing into the snack I left as a distraction for him, and isn't reacting like he heard a thing. Never heard of a donkey speaking, but...

Human?

There it is again. This deep, soothing, cool voice, that rumbles a little in the back. Clearer now, but... The words sound in my head—in my actual head! Panic consumes me, and I scream.

Oh, pollination. Another thin strip wraps around my waist, drawing me further and further in until my back connects with the tree. The grips tighten almost comfortingly, pushing the air out of me, and I loose another scream. *Why are you afraid?*

I claw at the restraints. "What's going on?" I squeak, shaking so hard my teeth rattle. "Revenge of the Taunting Thousand-Leaf?"

Re...what? No, no. I'm courting you, human, the damn phantom voice sounds again. *Do you not wish to embrace?*

I cracked my head on something. Surely that's it. This is some weird—oh I bet it was the stuff off the flower! Hallucinogenic, has to be.

I stare at Francis, waiting on the wonder-drug to make him turn into a rainbow, but he keeps

munching his snack, ignoring me completely.

If you don't object, I'd like to continue my exploration of your body.

My—?!

I sit, like a moron, with my mouth hanging open. This is what my brain decides to hallucinate? Really? Maybe Mom was right, I do need a boyfriend. Or a therapist.

At my silence, the vines around my body start moving again. The first loops back over my breasts, while the second drops lower, teasing at the hem of my shirt.

“What...” I mumble.

They keep moving, squeezing my waist, circling around my belly button with a soft curiosity that has my muscles jumping in surprise. A new vine enters, wrapping over my knee and slipping under the hole in my pants. The frills tickle my bare thigh, walking up the inside until it brushes the elastic of my panties.

“Whoa, whoa, hey! Hey! I object! I object very much!” I throw my hands out at my sides, blindly fighting off the ghost of botanists past, and the vines freeze again, though I'm held firmly in place by the plant's positioning.

I don't understand.

Now I know I'm losing it, because the voice sounds confused, but with an underlying hurt that makes my throat tighten.

You accepted my courting gift.

“What?” I ask. “What gift, what are—who even are you? Where are you?!”

The vines tighten, for just a moment, like they're trying to get my attention. *What do you mean? I'm right here.*

Nuh uh.

I brush my fingers along the vine up over my chest, and it flexes in response.

There's a rumble of satisfaction in my head.

I accept your advance, human, the...the frickin' plant says, tightening his hold.

“My what?”

What do they call you?

For some reason, probably dehydration and hysteria, I answer. “Jayda.”

Beautiful. Like you.

A laugh rockets out of me. “Okay, thanks, I think? What exactly are you doing here?”

Courting you. It's why I gave you that gift.

I open my mouth to answer and another drop of water falls from somewhere, landing right on my tongue. It's sweet, too, but that's where the similarities stop.

A buzz hits my throat, skittering down, sending a warm tingle through my body. The tension leaves my shoulders, my legs unable to support me any longer as I sink deeper.

That's better, the plant purrs down at me, his voice vibrating through my whole body. *That should help quiet your mind, little flower.*

As adorable as the nickname is, it sparks my brain. “The flower, was that your gift?”

It was. I've guided you to other treasures as well.

Oh. My. Gourd. It all makes sense now. I thought I was just incredibly lucky, but I'm actually happier knowing I had help.

“The scorpion lily? The Maldavian trumpet? Those were you?”

Yes. The lily, as you call it, was the toughest to coax to life. But you are worth it.

This is too exciting. I'm having a conversation—two way, I might add—with a plant. And it gave me gifts. This is bigger than funding. This is...this is life changing.

“Thank you. What do they call you?”

I call myself Leon.

Aw, what a cute non-plant name.

“Leon, do you have any idea what an amazing find you are? The scientific community is going to lose their minds! If I could just—”

A much larger dollop of the liquid hits the back of my throat, and I convulsively swallow.

My mind goes blank for a moment, the racing thoughts quiet as all my focus is on the vines gliding across my skin provocatively.

I'm only interested in what a find you are. Not this science community you speak of.

My heart flips on end, a smile hooking my mouth. Leave it to a plant to give me the single best compliment I've ever heard.

“That's, uh, nice. I'm just me, though. Nothing special.”

You're wrong. I've been drawn to you since you arrived. Since you apologized to the branch you broke. A gentle, kind heart beats in this...ample chest.

The vines under my shirt start moving again, the one between my breasts roaming back up to the collar of my shirt as the other creeps up to tease my chest. The petals send chills across my skin, the thin strip wrapping around my hardened nipple and pinching.

I gasp, my body arching into his touch, and the first vine wrapping around my neck to keep my head angled back. The tip explores my jaw while the girth of him keeps me in place, the soft end brushing down my cheek and over my bottom lip, warming my blood.

I like the way your skin feels. Does my touch please you?

“Yes,” I gasp again. His touch leaves that stickier, sweet liquid on my mouth, and I suck it off my lip like it's my last hope of survival. “I like you touching me.”

I swear, the very ground shakes with his satisfied, emboldened groan.

Then I'll continue.

The rational part of my brain that isn't currently on fire with lust, tells me to run screaming, but that part sucks, so I'm not going to listen to it. This is proof that plants *do* have feelings. Big ones. And this one happens to feel something for me. I may not know what he looks like yet, but I do know how good it feels to be touched in such a reverent way. The same way I've always treated the specimens in my lab.

His vines tighten in unison, the one around my throat holding firm while the one around my leg jumps back to life. He teases the crease of my thigh, almost asking permission, and without a solitary thought I spread my legs for him.

His moan borders on a growl now, and my answering whimper only seems to make him more excited. The vine loops under the soaked fabric, while the second abandons my chest to assist in ripping the cotton to pieces.

I squeak, my hips bucking toward him until both vines are massaging my lips. He strokes my heated skin with a level of curiosity that has stars dancing through my vision. He slowly works his way to my slit, drawing tighter and tighter circles around it until he finally plunges inside—one right after the other.

“Oh, sweet magnolias,” I choke out, my legs shaking and trying to snap shut on reflex. The vines twist together, making a knot that rubs directly on my g-spot, while the tendrils flex and stretch.

Tell me how that feels, little flower.

For the first time in my life, my brain lets me down. “G-Good,” I manage shakily, reaching behind me to hang on to the velvet bark of the tree. “Really good, Leon.”

Magnificent. Mind blowing. I’m only a few miles away from camp, but it feels like I’ve tripped into a whole new dimension of pleasure and madness, but I can’t vocalize that in anything but broken moans.

I feel that you can take more of me, Leon muses, pushing the vines deeper, the spread making the knot twist and pulse against my frayed nerves. *Are these coverings of any level of importance to you?*

Literally nothing matters besides taking more of him right now, so I shake my head no. I don’t trust my voice at all anymore.

The answering tear of fabric is startling, but not as much as even more vines snapping around my skin. Two thicker ones wrap under my thighs, spreading my knees wide and pulling my muddy feet off the ground and propping me in his grip.

I squirm in his hold, testing his restraints, but he holds fast. The most I can do is roll my hips, and even that is minimal.

A new form rises from the ground, the mature, blooming version of the vines currently on my body. A thick, long flower with a cap at the end sits at the end, perched on a wide, veined version of the vines already touching me. It’s as thick as my arm and may be just as long, with a rounded cap on the tip that’s leaking the same delicious liquid he’s been teasing my mouth with. It’s a ruddy plum color, with throbbing purple veins from root to tip. It brushes my thigh on its way up my body, fleshy, throbbing, warm, like...like...

“Oh my God,” I whimper, tipping my hips up for him, the warm flower brushing my lips.

Are you all right, little flower?

“Yes,” I answer like a base instinct, the cool air on my bare skin making my face flame. His heartbeat pounds like a drum in the flowering cock, the soft vibrations nothing more than a cruel temptation I can’t quite grasp. I’m soaked down my thighs, dripping off his vines, and any other time I’d be dying of embarrassment.

But... It’s like being home alone. Better than being alone. I... I trust him.

“A-Are you all right?”

There’s a pause, and then, so softly I almost miss it, he chuckles.

My, you are a find, he whispers. Something brushes under my ear, and it almost feels like a kiss. *I’m more than all right, sweet Jayda.*

The bulbous head pushes against my opening, meeting little resistance, though the smaller veins part and open me wider anyway. He fits inside so tightly it makes my eyes water, the thinner parts spinning around him like ribs, pressing against every inch of my walls.

He gives me less than half a minute to breathe through my stomach before he starts moving.

There’s no hesitation in him, no uncertainty. His outward grip tightens to bruising while all three lengths fuck me inside, the knot twisting, his cock pounding, the vines massaging my most sensitive places.

My head lulls against the vine around my neck as my orgasm crashes through me, faster than I

thought physically possible. The thick vein bends up, changing his angle right in the middle, so his vein thrums against my clit with every downward thrust.

My moan borders on a scream, my mouth wide as I struggle to pull in a breath. He traces the O shape of it with his vine, brushing over my teeth, and I chase him with my tongue, lapping the addictive nectar off him.

Mother of... Leon hisses, slipping out of my pussy with a shiver.

“Don’t stop,” I whimper, bucking and struggling. “P-Please don’t stop. Please.”

I squeak as he drops me backwards, so I’m laid out in his embrace, my legs pushed even wider and held up in the air. The thick vine loops around my waist and pushes back inside, upside down now, the cap finding new, raw places to rub against. I let my head hang back on him, parting my mouth and holding it, offering what I subconsciously know he wants from me.

Such a good little flower, he muses, a new, wet sensation ripping my shirt open and landing on each of my nipples. I don’t have time to look down and see what it is before he’s fully in my mouth, every vine around my body wrapping tighter and slithering up to meet on my tongue.

Some prod at the back of my throat, pushing down and smothering my needy moans, while others flex against my cheeks or tangle around my tongue.

I move it, licking when I can, relaxing into every tug he does as the large vines piston faster.

So warm and wet and willing.

I arch with a throaty whine as his groan echoes in my head. More of the sweet nectar dribbles down my throat, sending my system into a tailspin of lust.

Leon milks another orgasm out of me, the vines in my mouth twitching. He groans as I tighten and spasm around him, the sound coming from somewhere behind me, the flower inside me spreading at the base, suctioning to my flesh in a way that makes my eyes roll back in my head. I groan around the vines in my throat as he fills me, his seed slick and stinging, sinking deep into my flesh and bone.

He gives a deep shudder and slips out of my mouth, gathering my drool up like it gets him as hot as his nectar gets me.

You are perfect.

I laugh, a delirious little noise, my body completely deadweight in his hold. “You’re not so bad yourself, studly.”

Will you stay with me forever?

The haze of post-orgasm bliss starts to fade as he sets me back down, the vines leaving my mouth slowly and trailing down to circle me in a hug.

“S-stay?”

Yes. I can create a canopy to protect you.

To prove his point, leaves shift above me, shading my body.

“That’s so cool,” I breathe, swallowing as I rock forward to my knees. “But...I can’t stay. I’ll run out of food soon, and I don’t have any hunting or trapping skills. Don’t want to eat Francis either, he’s a good donkey. As far as donkeys go. Sorry, anyway, no...”

Oh. His voice is sad again, that heartbreak that must run down every root ringing through my mind, nearly bringing me to tears. *I’m beginning to think I don’t understand human mating rituals very well.*

I bark out a wet laugh. “Humans don’t really, uh... *mate*, as you call it.”

So this is it, then? he asks, a genuine but tragic curiosity tinting his words. *You give yourselves*

and then...what? It ends?

He doesn't mean it in a mean way, and that's almost worse. He sounds absolutely devastated, and I can't help but feel it's all my fault.

"Y-Yeah...kinda," I whisper, trying to swallow the tears building in my throat. "That's, um...that's been my experience."

I could give you a new experience. You deserve better than you've had, if anyone has ever let you go.

"Oh, my God, Leon." Emotion clogs my throat. "Why can't this be easy?"

It could be... You could stay. I'll do anything you need me to.

I spin to face him, and stumble back a step. This whole time I thought I'd been pressed against a regular tree trunk, and that maybe Leon was just a bunch of vines.

But he's not. I crane my neck, and am rewarded by a deep set pair of vibrant gold eyes. He doesn't have skin, not in a traditional sense. And, I was sort of right. He is just a bunch of vines, but they form a massive humanoid body, wrapping around each other to form arms and hands with longer vines for fingers.

He lifts one of his arms, holding his viney hand out, and I trail my fingers along his, smiling. I explore his arm, gasping when the vines vibrate in response. Two of them uncoil and curl around my wrist possessively.

Little flower, your touches tell me much.

I gaze up into his eyes again, overcome. When his other hand touches my shoulder I crumple forward, curling against him as he wraps me in a hug. His vines slither around me, tighter until I swear he and I are one.

"Why am I feeling like this with you so fast? This seriously hurts like we're breaking up."

You've always had deep empathy for plants. You can tell my feelings are genuine. That we are a match.

As I nestle deeper in his embrace, I know he's right. It might not make sense to anyone else, but it does to me. How can I leave something like this behind? I can't.

I lean back, and the vines release one at a time. I press my palm against the bark. "I have an idea. You can come with me. I'll take you back to my house and find you the best pot. You can stay in my bedroom, uh, for reasons."

One of the smaller vines strokes along my cheek, so tender. *I...cannot do that, little flower. I must stay here. Is there nothing I can do to convince you?*

The vine with the soft fronds teases along my thigh and over my hip, sending heat through me again.

"I wish I could. God, I really do. I've never had such amazing orgasms, but besides that, I think you're the most amazing being I've ever met."

A tear slips free, and he catches it. The drop clings to the tip of his vine, and he holds it up in front of my face as I smear it's twin into my cheek.

Your sorrow is as genuine as mine.

"Yeah, it is." I sniffle. "This sucks."

If there was a way for me to come with you—

"Please, can you?" I grab his fingers and squeeze. "What do I need to do? Special soil? Uh, lots of water right? I can do that."

He rumbles a chuckle that sounds a little like distant thunder. *Such a treasure, all on your own. There...is a way, but it will take time.*

“Anything.” I press my face against his palm, breathing in his earthy scent.

His other hand lifts slowly, one long vine extending. As I watch, a small bud forms at the tip. It slowly grows, unfurling to reveal the same violet and orange petals that started this all.

Hold out your hand.

I do, and the vine detaches from his hand, falling onto mine with the flower attached.

“It’s still so beautiful.”

As are you. Take care of it, and soon, it will grow enough that we can speak. Then enough that we can...mate.

“But how?” I cradle the vine to my chest like a newborn.

It will share my thoughts. I swear there’s a smile on his face as mine twists in disbelief. *You’re just going to have to trust me.*

We hold each other’s gaze, my mind racing. I really wish I *could* stay here, but it absolutely wouldn’t work. Pesky body needing food and what not.

I rest my cheek against his chest with a sigh, content to be held until a large drop of actual water drips down my back. It’s followed by another, then several more, the only warning before the bottom drops out of the sky.

Leon covers me quickly with a canopy, but Francis brays impatiently.

“I...I have to go.”

Thank goodness rain hides tears. I wipe the droplets from my face, snagging the evidence of my heartbreak.

I will think of you only, little flower.

“Same,” I choke out, stroking the vines along his stomach. “And I’ll make sure I give this guy nothing but the best. He’ll grow big and tall in no time.”

Leon chuckles again, curling a vine around my jaw. *I cannot wait. Goodbye, Jayda.*

Damn, where’s the rain when I need it?

A pit forms in my chest, heart breaking in two as tears spill over again. Leon catches them all, flicking them into the forest.

It is not forever.

“I know, I know.” I sniffle, forcing a smile. “Bye, Leon.”

I push back slightly out of his protective embrace and every vine still wrapped around me unfurls.

I’m empty and lonely and maybe I don’t need to eat, I could just die here, that’s fine.

Francis brays again, jerking at his reins, reminding me that’s just not possible.

I give Leon an awkward wave as I walk backward. He imitates the gesture with two of his vines, and my heart squeezes.

Rain pummels the forest floor in a wide circle around me, and I glance up to see the canopy following my steps, protecting me the whole walk back to this stupid rent-a-donkey.

I clutch the flowery vine tighter, hoping that will ease this vicious ache, but it doesn’t. Leon watches as I climb onto Francis, and even when I force the mammoth donkey to turn around and glance back over my shoulder, Leon’s still watching.

Eventually, I out-walk the canopy, and it’s like I step into a waterfall.

Francis isn’t super happy about it, but honestly, I don’t care.

I get back to my camp, tie Francis off under an awning, and Elowyn's generally terrified face pops around the corner.

"I was worried to death! Um..."

Her round cheeks flush as her gaze slides down my body.

Oh my gourd, that's right. I glance down at my shredded and non-existent clothes and cut a sad smile back at her. "I uh, fell. It's fine."

"Yeah, it is," she hisses under her breath, quickly clearing her throat and spinning on her heel. "Grab a towel before you get pneumonia. Or get mauled by mosquitoes and catch malaria. Or cholera. Or—"

"Ellie."

She snaps her mouth shut and ducks her head, freckled cheeks flushing. "I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

Elowyn is someone who learned a bit too much in the medical field, and became a wee bit of a hypochondriac. Luckily, she remains self-aware. I give her a soft grin. "Yeah."

"Sorry," she murmurs. "But seriously, um. Clothes."

I duck inside and quickly secure the precious cutting of Leon in my labware glass container.

Ellie eyes me the whole time, curious, and as I set the last latch she side steps to the container and crouches in front of it.

"Did you find it?"

Oh, shit. "Nah, that's not it, just something I wanted to run a few tests on."

"Huh."

She taps the side like she expects it to flinch, and I hold my breath, hoping it does. It doesn't, sadly, so I trudge to the towels and wrap one around me, as I drop on a chair and rinse the mud from my legs. She continues studying it, twisting the container to get better angles, and my pulse kicks up.

Ellie may only be a grad student, but she's smarter than most. Hence why I asked her to come along. Only, now I wish I'd brought one of the dumber ones.

Lucky for me, she doesn't ask any more questions.

Once I'm clean enough, I redress and join her in packing up the rest of camp.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out, JayJay. I'll miss the research trips."

I exhale harshly as I secure the lid on the last crate. That's right. How could I forget that? I'm broke as fuck. The cutting of Leon could set me up for life. All the best in research equipment, access to the best facilities, notoriety...

Without it, this really is it. I'm done.

But I know what happens to super special plants or animals when they're discovered, and I don't want anyone to study or dissect or try to replicate Leon. He's mine. I'll just figure out something else.

"Yeah. It's been fun. Ready to go?"

"Sure thing." Ellie glances at me sideways as I clutch the container tightly. "Shouldn't you put that in with the other specimens?"

"No," I snap, rearing back like she tried to grab it, even though she didn't move.

"Are...you sure you're okay?" Her brows tilt, concern bunching her cute features.

"I'm fine," I laugh it off. "You know how airport baggage people are. I just want to be extra careful with this guy, that's all."

She squints at me, but I turn around and gesture to the caravan of off-road vehicles pulling in.

“Help me direct these guys, and let’s go home.”

I don’t remember much of the trip back. Ellie does her best to cheer me up with her tales of random diseases and reading funny memes she finds on social media while I stare out the airplane window. I still feel like I left my soul back in the rainforest, but she does center me a little.

Luggage takes an eternity and a half to make it down to us, and I’m happier than ever that I tucked Leon in my carryon with me. Right now I only have to hide how numb I feel, and it’s easy to pretend I’m simply sad I’m going to lose all my funding.

Okay, I am sad about that. Really sad. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now for a job, let alone how I’ll afford rent this month when my boss fires me. Definitely a *when* sorta thing. She was already against this “wild goose chase” trip, and I’m coming back with nothing. I didn’t even bother to find something else to distract her with.

I’m so screwed.

I squeeze my bag tighter, the container pressing at my hip comforting me a little. It’ll be okay. We’ll figure something out, and it’s better than seeing Leon ripped apart and put on display. Not everyone in the scientific community is near as kind as I am.

“JayJay?” Ellie nudges me with her elbow. “You look a little pale. Are you okay? How many fingers am I holding up?”

She wiggles her fingers in front of my face, and in spite of everything, I smile. No one’s going to hurt Leon. No one will ever find him after me, either, once I get online and rip that poster to shreds.

“Three,” I answer. “Four if you count the thumb on your other hand.”

She squints and presses her soft hand to my forehead, then my cheek, then my neck. My breath catches a little, and save for biting down on her plush lip, she doesn’t seem to notice.

“Was just stressing out about the luggage,” I lie. “I know you have a lot of important stuff in there.”

“Oh, it’ll be fine. I’m sure they’re just really overloaded, y’know, it’s not like we were the only people on that flight. I mean, it kinda felt like it sometimes, but that’s just because you’re kinda like the sun—oh lookie there, my bag!”

She scuttles away to grab the suitcase, mine right after hers, but I end up following her when she doesn’t immediately rush back. I rest my hand on her back so she knows I’m there, and when her eyes widen in surprise, I leave it there. Just a moment longer.

“Thanks,” I say, “for coming all the way out there with me.”

“Oh, no, thank you,” she says in a rush. “It was so fun. Really. Even if it was wet and buggy, I had a lot of fun with you.” She swallows, rubbing her arm anxiously. “Well...”

“Yeah.” I force a smile. Worst part of this trip being such a ‘massive flop’ is I don’t know when I’ll ever get to spend time with her again. Without additional funding, I can’t afford to pay her, which means she’ll probably assist on one of my co-worker’s next field expeditions. No telling when she’ll be back.

“I’ll see you around?”

She nods, and surprises me by hopping up on her toes and wrapping her arms around my neck in a warm hug. “Definitely.”

After we account for all the luggage, we walk together to her car and I promise her I’ll call her if

anything comes up. I'm finally on my own, with this part of Leon, and after my ride drops me off back at my house, I race to the door. I need to get him planted ASAP.

"Stupid...keys." I fumble through, and race to my greenhouse. It's delicate work, but once I get the soil sorted and settle Leon's vine on top, little roots reveal themselves, pushing down.

"There we go, get comfy."

As I watch, the whole vine slowly vanishes under the surface until only the flower remains visible. I brush my fingers along the velvety petals with a frown.

I shouldn't hope he'll burst up fully grown and ready to love me, I know how this stuff works. Still, I sit here for hours, waiting, fussing over the soil and hydration levels.

Eventually, I have to do all the dumb human things that kept me from staying with him in the first place. Like eat, drink, shower, and sleep.

I climb into bed, flick off the light, and stare into the darkness. Even though I've lived alone ever since I moved out of my parent's house, tonight feels especially lonely. After tossing and turning for hours, I speed through the house, and grab Leon's pot. I set it on the other side of the bed and clear everything off the top of the other nightstand, setting him right in the center.

Leaning in slowly, I give the flower a gentle kiss. "Goodnight, Leon."

I swear the petal shifts against my lip, but it's my imagination, I know it is.

Still, I smile and slide under the covers on this side, just to be closer to him.

After the first week, I start to worry I've killed him. Or imagined the entire thing. I mean, I see the plant, the flower, every single day, but nothing changes at all.

Until one night, roots explode out of the bottom. I quickly replant him, petting the little flower.

This is my life for the next month. Caring for Leon consumes every waking moment, not because he needs that much attention, but because I'm a woman obsessed.

I barely make it to work on time and leave early, hurrying home to spend hours chatting at him.

He outgrows a pot every few days, but only the root system, never the flower. His pot takes up the entire half of my room, and I'm pretty sure if he gets any thicker, I'm gonna have to move him off into the greenhouse.

Thank gourd I got demoted, not fired. I'm running out of options as is.

"This would be so much easier if you could talk again," I grumble, shoving my nightstand away to make room for the newest massive pot. I wipe the sweat off my brow and turn to face Leon in my kitchen, planting my hands on my hips as I study the never-growing flower. "I should've asked more questions. Are you gonna be freestanding when you're done?"

Nothing.

I stick my fingers in the dirt and rub up the stem, tickling the pad of my thumb on the underside of the petals. "It's okay. We'll get there, huh?"

The doorbell ringing startles me like I got caught picking mushrooms. Good grief. I'm not expecting anybody. I stomp to the door and peer into the peephole. Maybe it's the mailman—I did order a humidifier for Leon and a new light. They normally fling it at the porch, but—

Holy shit. Butterflies tumbling in my stomach, I clumsily fumble the lock and jerk the door open.

"Elowyn!"

She pushes her hair off her adorable face and adjusts her glasses, offering me an awkward wave. "Hey. Hi, JayJay. Can I come in?"

Oh, the worst timing.

“Um...”

She steps inside, her eyes down on the stacks of paper in her tight hands. “So, I did some more research and based on some of the local accounts I was able to scrounge up, I really think you found the—”

She glances up from her notebook, eyes round like dinner plates. “Oh...”

I step in front of the pot, like I could possibly block the dirt, the shattered terracotta, the massive, twisting vines protecting one tiny little flower.

“But I thought you were... Isn’t that the—?”

“Ellie, it really isn’t a good time—”

“But, wait, yes! Yes it absolutely is the taunting thousand-leaf, see? You can see from the—”

I open my mouth to tell her not to touch it, a purely over-protection and possessive reaction on my part, when the brand new pot snaps in two as a vine snaps out and wraps around Ellie’s wrist.

She screams and reels back, and more vines whip up, pinning her wrists above her head and slamming her delicate body back into the wall. She kicks her feet when she’s lifted off the ground, and the plant pins those down, too, rising out of the pot in a masculine tower.

“Hey!” I shout as Ellie’s scream turns to panicked squeaks, weaving through the vines to stand in front of her. “Easy, *easy*! She’s a friend!”

The vines pause, but don’t withdraw, still twisting and curling around themselves. They tangle up into a thick torso, a neck, a head...a face.

“JayJ-Jay,” Ellie stammers, shaking so hard against my back it makes my own body tremble. “What is—what’s going...”

Wide, beautiful golden eyes blink at me drowsily from the plant, and I cover my mouth with both hands in shock.

“Leon?” I ask after a beat, reaching a shaking hand out to brush his chest. “Is-Is that you?”

He doesn’t speak, but reaches for my face. His touch is softer than it once was, months of growth no match to the years he spent all alone in the rainforest, but the familiarity brings tears to my eyes. He trails one viney finger across my lips and squeezes my jaw, just enough to send the message.

I open my mouth, and he pushes inside, one long digit brushing the back of my throat. That sweet nectar fills my mouth and my eyes roll back in my head, fire blooming in my belly.

Hello again, little flower.

The vine retreats and I race toward him, brushing my hands over every part of him I can reach.

“Leon, it’s really you! I can’t believe it. It worked!”

“Who is Leon?”

Shit. Forgot she was here. I spin and stare at Ellie’s blanched face. I can either tell her the entire truth, or make something up, but at this point, she’s probably not going to buy a ‘you’re having a hallucination’ story.

Leon’s vines tighten, lifting her a bit more.

“JayJay, please,” she screeches. “Call the freaky attack plant off! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble, I just th-thought you could get your grants back...”

“What are you sorry for? I— No, Ellie, I’m not mad, I’m not gonna hurt you. And neither is... Leon, let her go. She’s not going to hurt me or you.”

She is not a threat?

“No,” I answer quickly, giving one of his vines a soft pat as I smile at Ellie. “Listen to me, I know

this is absolutely crazy, but you can't tell anybody about this."

"Who are you talking to? Why do you keep saying Leon? Did...did you name the plant? Why does he look sort of like a man?" She glances between Leon and me like she's not sure who the bigger threat is.

"No, that's his name. He told me when I found him in the rain—Oh, bugs." I turn back to Leon. "She thinks I'm crazy. She can't hear you."

No, little flower, the butterfly cannot at the moment.

My heart does a weird little somersault. For a second, I think I'm jealous she got a nickname, but that's not true. It's cute, and it fits her, and... Am I turned on by him noticing my friend? Oof, I need him to touch me. "If you give her some of that...stuff, would you?"

Flower!

I can't tell if he's shocked or turned on. Maybe a bit of both. I can relate. "What?"

"JayJay, you're seriously scaring me right now."

I flit my hand at her and stare at Leon.

You're asking me to... He shivers, the vines making up his neck darkening. Is he blushing? ...*to court her, as well?*

Is that courting? It feels a lot dirtier than courting, if I'm honest. Great, now I'm blushing. I nod, not trusting my voice, and look back to Ellie. She's gonna pass out here soon if she doesn't get in on the conversation.

One of the vines tickles her mouth, but she jerks her face away, hiding in her elbow with a whimper.

"Can I?" I ask, holding my hand out under her chin. Leon understands instantly, twisting the vines around my fingers, leaving the sticky liquid dripping off my fingers. It sparkles a little, bits of pollen shining under the light.

"It'll all make sense if you eat this," I say, stroking Ellie's heated cheek. "Okay?"

She peeks up at me, sniffing pitifully, and I want to hug her so bad it physically hurts.

"Don't be scared," I say, bringing my fingers to her lips. She doesn't look at Leon this time, her wide eyes only watching me, searching for any signs of deception. Or maybe psychosis. Either could be true, and I don't blame her for being skeptical at all.

She opens her mouth slowly, and I slip my fingers inside. Her chest jumps with a gasp as I stroke her tongue, smearing the sticky golden liquid across it. I watch the effect consume her, her eyes nearly crossing as she moans around my fingers, sucking the sweetness off with an eagerness that heats my bones.

Sweet magnolia, that's hot.

Timid little thing, Leon muses. *Although obedient.*

Ellie jerks, her eyes snapping open as she looks around the room. When her eyes settle back on Leon, she mumbles around my fingers, until I slip them out for her to say, "Did it just talk?"

I nod, stepping aside so they can see each other more clearly. "Uh, Ellie, this is Leon, my, um... Plant...boyfriend? It's too soon for that, oh, gourd, um, Leon, this is Ellie."

Leon chuckles, and Ellie glances outside for storm clouds. *Pleasure to meet you, butterfly.*

"Oh my God," Ellie hisses, drawing in a ragged breath. "Oh. My. God."

"M-Maybe you should sit down for this," I mumble. "Or lay down. You need water. Um. Leon, can she..."

Leon tightens his hold on Ellie and snaps her up close, moving her through the doorway and into my bedroom. He drops her on her back on my mattress, but keeps her arms bound above her head, her ankles strapped flat.

Not exactly what I meant, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy about it.

I grab a bottle of water and a damp towel before meeting them in the room.

"You didn't fall," Ellie mumbles to the ceiling as I lay the cloth on her forehead. "You most definitely did not fall and rip all your clothes up. This is why you were gone so long, wasn't it? You were... What were you doing?"

I really don't know how to answer that question, but luckily—or unluckily, I guess—Leon has no such problems.

She had accepted my courting gift and we proceeded to exchange fluids.

"Oh, gourd, Leon."

Do humans refer to it as mating? Or pollination, perhaps?

I pat the vines that make up his arm. "We'll talk about that later."

Ellie bursts out laughing for one second, sucking the sound back in with a whimper.

"Am I dreaming again? I-I had one sort of like this, not with the plant, but here in your bed."

My brows lift, heat blasting my cheeks. "You did?"

I can taste her acceptance as I did yours in the forest.

Great, now all I can think about is how Ellie tastes, while my plant boyfriend is holding her splayed out on my bed like a literal prize. What is my actual life?

"Okay. Maybe we should back up and slow down a bit."

"Taste my..." She breathes it out, her chest rising faster.

She does not wish to slow anything down.

I rub my palm over my face with a sigh. This is absolutely not how I pictured my reunion with Leon. He curls a vine around my waist, letting the end trail up over one of my breasts, and Ellie's gaze tracks the motion hungrily.

"Ellie. I need to know if you're okay with this. You can leave, if you forget you saw any of this. Or, you can stay and—"

"No way, I'm not leaving." She says with more conviction than I've ever heard in her voice. "That's worse than going to the bathroom in a dream. It never ends well. You've gotta know that."

I giggle a bit, but shake it off. "Ellie, it's not a dream. This, us, Leon, it..." I trail off, sucking on my lips, and Leon shifts so he's over Ellie and closer to me. He's heavy on her legs, and her breath catches as Leon nuzzles my neck.

Is this something you are comfortable with, little flower?

Ellie's face falls, real doubt clouding her eyes, which is borderline ridiculous because she's absolutely perfect. Gorgeous and smart and funny and kind. Single. And she literally just said she has dreams about me, and Leon already promised me this would work and we'd be together again, but... I can't turn the over-analytical part of my mind off.

Why am I so nervous?

Leon trails a vine across my neck, making me shiver as a low groan rumbles from his chest.

Mm... Yes, you are quite accepting. Perhaps it would be better for you if I were to...

In one swift motion, he has Ellie and I flipped around, me spread out on the bed with her between us, kneeling between my legs.

Ellie is far less dazed than I am. She shakes her head in surprise and settles her hands on my waist to keep upright, while Leon wraps his vines around her hips and pulls her body flush to his.

“Oh,” she squeaks, pushing her ass back against him as her fingers bruise my waist.

Yes, far more comfortable this way. Butterfly, strip her for me. I'll take care of you.

“Can I really?” She’s breathless, way more excited than I’ve ever seen her. More than when we found that DartWorm Root in the Atchafalaya Basin.

Ellie is watching my eyes for a response, and doesn’t move until I give her a nod. She slips her soft hands under my shirt, sending a parade of goosebumps across my skin. Leon lets my wrists go only for a moment to peel it off with several smaller vines. He wraps my wrists together and pins them back above my head, while Ellie runs her hands down my chest and stomach, pressing soft, wet kisses between my ribs.

“I can’t believe I really get to do this,” she whispers against my stomach. “I’ve been in love with you forever.”

My pulse skips as I watch, my gaze bouncing between the top of her head and Leon’s massive face.

I doubt she can read you the way I can, little flower. Tell her.

I nod, swallowing my nerves. How he knows what’s in my heart, I don’t know. But it only makes me love him more.

“Tell me what, JayJay?”

“I... I liked you, too. I’m just a moron when it comes to this sort of thing. I mean, you know how I am about plants. Hard to see the trees for the forest.”

Her delicate fingers slowly untie the strings on my sweats as she grins. “I do know.”

Leon is not nearly as gentle with her. He slips his vines around her body, up under her clothes, tightening and pulling until they tear off her body.

“Holy crap, that was hot!”

I apologize, I could attempt to lower my temperature.

We both giggle. “No, Leon,” I say, dragging my foot up the back of his viney leg. “That means she *really* liked it.”

He sends a few exploratory vines over the curve of her ass, her eyes fluttering closed when they disappear.

I see. Yes, my butterfly is quite wet. It would seem she likes a firmer touch than my delicate flower. Is that right?

“Um...maybe...”

A vine wraps around her hair, craning her head back. She answers with a gasp as he teases another one over her mouth for just a second, before plunging it in.

Her muffled moan is so sexy I can hardly stand it. I tug at the restraints, wanting to touch her, too, but Leon holds fast. More vines slither from between Ellie's legs, rubbing against her while he teases me, tickling my ribs and pinching my breasts until I'm panting.

She stares at the vines as they work their magic over me, whimpering when he buries a large one inside of me. I buck into the intrusion, but Leon leans in, pinning my hips still with Ellie's weight, thrusting in and out so slowly my legs shake.

Taste her, butterfly.

Leon lets her hair go, and she drops to her elbows, skating her soft mouth over my clit, teasing, testing before she tenderly flicks in time with Leon’s pumping.

"Oh, hell," I whine, arching into her mouth as much as I can.

"You taste amazing," she whispers against my skin, sucking my clit while her hand presses against my opening, stroking Leon with her fingertips with every thrust.

Where his motions inside me are measured and perfect, the vine working Ellie pounds her almost mercilessly. She moans, the vibration sending waves through me.

"Harder, please," she groans, resting her arm over my hips. "There, right there."

Leon surprises us both with a heated chuckle, pushing Ellie right to the cusp of her orgasm before slowing down, holding her there before dropping her back. She chokes on a sob, and my entire body jolts. It's almost enough to get me off on its own.

"That was beautiful," I whisper.

Would my little flower like a taste of my butterfly now?

I nearly shout my "please!"

Ellie whimpers as Leon yanks her head back, gently bringing me up to my knees. He flips her on her back, guiding her head back between my thighs.

She runs her hands up my legs, scratching back down my thighs as her tongue works tight circles around my clit. Leon's vines part ways on my stomach, squeezing my breasts and push between my cheeks, massaging every nerve as he slips back inside me from a new angle. He recreates the knot with three vines now, rutting the thick bulb against my g-spot while Ellie gives a harsh suck to my clit.

I come with a scream, held up only by Leon's gentle vines, soaking Ellie's soft skin with myself.

Beautiful, little flower.

Ellie groans her agreement, pulling me down harder when I try to lift and let her breathe.

"Oh, dear God," I hiss, both of them pushing me further, refusing to let me down. I drop on my hands, but Leon moves his grip from my breasts to my neck, holding me away from my prize.

God, she's perfect everywhere, her skin throbbing and glowing with need. Her juices soak down her quivering thighs, her lips bruised from Leon's former treatment.

How much do you want her?

I want to bite him for asking me to talk. I want to make her feel even half as good as she's making me feel now.

"So bad," I hiss through my teeth. "Leon..."

He rubs that cock shaped flower through her folds, nearly growling when she keens in desperation. The suctioning vines bite at her skin, punishing every involuntary twitch and flinch her body gives until she's vibrating the whole bed.

I slide my hand over her mound in time with his cock, following his lead and pinching down on the places that make her wetter. She gasps against me, and I grind down harder, smothering her like she needs.

You're very good at reading my butterfly.

I shiver at the praise, looking up into his face. "May I taste you both, Leon?"

She and I would enjoy that.

I pitch forward and together, we share what feels like hours of pleasure until Ellie and I are exhausted.

With a happy hum, I curl against her pliant, satisfied body with my own. Leon winds vines around us in a hug, and I've never been happier. I'm so glad this has worked out. Who knew we had that

many orgasms in us?

“That was other-worldly,” she sighs, kissing my cheek.

I enjoyed that immensely. I never imagined I'd have two mates, let alone two so beautiful and perfect.

“Aw,” Ellie says with a little squeal, and I laugh.

“Yeah, he’s great with the compliments. And he’s so genuine. Can’t find a human guy like that.”

“Not a fat chance in Hell. Especially not with two penises. It’s a good thing I don’t have allergies.”

I snicker and nuzzle her ear. "Even I didn't know about that."

It is merely one of many blooms. I can grow as many of those as you'd like to have.

Oh my gourd. Even completely spent, I can't help but moan, tucking my face in Ellie's neck.

“JayJay.”

I lift my head and catch her gaze. “Hm?”

“This is huge.”

I suppose I could use a few less vines inside, though you seemed to enjoy them.

“N-no,” she blushes full on. “I meant you, as in that you exist. A sentient plant.”

Fear steals all my happiness, adrenaline making my muscles function again. I bolt upright, tucking my knees under me. “Ellie, you can’t tell anyone about him. About this. You know what they’ll do. I love him.”

“But, you need money,” she counters, grabbing my hand. “Rare plants are supposed to be your specialty and your validity in the field is coming into question. I just don’t want anything bad to happen. Maybe you could just turn in like, half of a leaf?”

“No.” Hurt slithers down my back. “Maybe you should go.”

“What?”

“If that’s really how you feel, then you’re not who I thought you were.”

She flinches like I struck her, and I look down to avoid the pain I caused her. I never would've done this if I thought she could even think of something so selfish. "JayJay..."

Her voice hurts my heart. Because I know it's not selfish. She's terrified of fame, of recognition, of me leaving her behind. Even I could see that. She just wants me to be okay...but it doesn't fix how I feel.

You have an exceedingly rare plant in your possession.

“Yeah, I know, Leon. But I’m not letting her, or anyone else separate us.”

Ellie's brows pinch, and she lowers her head to avoid my eyes this time.

I don't mean me, little flower.

I swivel a wild glance at him, following one of his long vines as it twists through my house and disappears through my greenhouse door.

Grabbing my shirt from the floor, I run after him, only to stop in the kitchen as he tugs an oblong object into view and deposits it on the counter.

“That thing? It’s just an ugly rock. I don’t even know why I brought it back, honestly.”

Your empathy with my kind led you to it, even though you weren't aware. It's a very pretty, sharp flower. When it blooms, it tosses thin, deadly, decorative webs out to catch food.

My eyes widen, and Ellie comes stumbling after me. Curiosity melts some of the shame from her face, and she tucks her clothes under her arm to examine the rock—er. Flower.

“Are you serious?” She picks it, turning it side to side. “That sounds an awful lot like—”

“The Emperor Lacethorn,” we say together.

“There aren’t even any credible records of it existing.” she whispers.

“If it is an Emperor Lacethorn, then it looks dead.”

It’s simply dormant. It needs an acidic environment, at least six feet underground to bloom.

Ellie and I slowly exchange glances.

“If this is really a—”

“Then you can claim official discovery—”

“And I’ll have all the funding I need.”

“You’ll be famous,” she whispers again, grinning, a deeper sadness sweeping over her.

Leon smooths a tendril over her cheek, lifting her dipping chin.

Why are you crying, butterfly?

“No reason.” She forces a smile. “I’m not even crying, just excited.”

As if I don’t know her by now.

“I don’t really care about that.” I step closer. “I’m more excited that I’ll get to hire you full time.”

She perks right back up, searching my eyes. “Do you mean that?”

“Absolutely.” I smile at her, sliding my palm along her waist. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“It was…” Her breath catches under my touch, and she steps closer, curling into my embrace. “It came out wrong, it’s okay.”

“And hey,” I say, pressing my mouth to her ear. “If you can keep up with me and Leon, maybe something more than full time.”

“There’s no way you mean that like I think you mean that.”

She meets my eyes, and I wink at her. Leon curls a vine around both our breasts at the same time, teasing each nipple until we’re sharing a gasp.

You should live here, too, butterfly. Then I can have you both, whenever I want. You can have me whenever you want.

“Cripes,” I whisper, my head falling back.

“You did mean it like that…Okay, yes. I’ll move in,” her word ends on a moan as Leon teases her stomach.

Fantastic. As that’s settled…

He draws Ellie backwards against his chest, knocking her clothes out of her hands. His cock glides between her thighs, thrumming against her center.

“Oh, God,” she whimpers, trying to buck into him, but he whips his vines around her thighs and holds her still for the torture. “Y-You’re not tired?”

No. I will not rest as you or my little flower will. I will let you know if I need to return to my soil. Thank you for your concern.

“I meant—” She cuts off with a deep groan, pushed up from her toes from Leon’s thick vines shoving inside her. Her mouth parts, and he gags her with the thinner, sucking vines, her throat bulging.

He taps my knees until I bend, kneeling in front of the two of them. I lean in and suck the juice from his length, his hips rolling toward me as the nectar lights me up inside. I rub two fingers against Ellie’s clit and wrap the other around Leon’s length, reveling in her squeals and his rumbled moans.

I tug the flower, the petals throbbing in my grip. “You said you can grow however many of these

we want?"

Yes, little flower. He sounds breathless, and it goes straight to my head. *Whatever you need.*

I hum and lean in, kissing Ellie's hip. "I want this one," I say, guiding him between my breasts, squeezing my shoulders together. "And I think Ellie wants one here, and...here."

Ellie jolts when I push her asscheeks apart and smack between them, burying her hands in my hair and nearly sobbing in want.

Leon rushes to follow my lead, thin vines stroking my jaw while he angles to fuck Ellie until her body shatters completely, and I return the first cock to my lips, drinking him down greedily.

Yeah. This is definitely more than a *budding* romance.

THE END

Helena & Natalia are teaming up for tons of other stories, from dark DDlg to monsters and everything in between. Follow us both to be sure you don't miss anything.

ABOUT HELENA NOVAK

Helena Novak has been making things up and bending people to her will from a very young age. She loves animals, tattoos, music, laughing, and reading, and you can usually find her entertaining one of those muses. She spends an obscene amount of time finding pretty new words and thinking up awful ways to torment her characters, and has the attention span of a gnat.

You might wanna stalk her...just be cool about it, 'kay?

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SAP, SNOW,
AND SPICE
VERA VALENTINE

BLURB

In the unfamiliar forests of Vermont, Mila finds herself out of her comfort zone in more ways than one. While cleaning up the mess her estranged husband left behind, a late spring snow storm threatens her life. Her unlikely rescuers aren't just living in the woods, however. They're an intrinsic part of them. Old bonds, new debts, and ancient magic flow like snowmelt in this short, steamy tale of love and lust among the trees.

STORY NOTES

Notes on potential triggers, kinks, and tropes contained in this story: There are references to cheating (previously, not perpetrated by the main characters), homicide, divorce, a fatal car accident, death, ingestion of fun bodily fluids (both while aware and while unaware), praise, and group activities. The two main male characters have a prior loving, established relationship with one another.

MILA

Fuck, it was cold. I knew it would be, intellectually, but actually tromping through the snow meant the weather was freezing my thoughts as diligently as it was trying to freeze my toes. I huffed and stamped my feet as I sniffled from a runny nose, another victim of Jack Frost's tender mercies.

My gloves were woefully inadequate things, bought for their "touch screen capable" fingertips rather than any suggestion of insulation. I was an idiot. A *cold* idiot. My useless ex-husband—rather, my *estranged* husband—had abruptly left me under a mountain of debt to go chase his dreams two years ago. His *dreams* just happened to have manifested as a twenty-three-year-old Russian webcam model.

He'd always had a believable reason ready if I asked why things had to be put under my name—bills, credit cards, loans. I trusted him; we were married, after all. When a surprisingly high credit card bill ended up uncovering logs of sexual chats with *Svetlana* on his computer, I confronted him. The screaming match died down after a few hours, and he'd retreated to sleep on the couch. I thought we'd hash things out the following morning, but he went to work and simply never came home, taking our more reliable vehicle and, I found out later, most of our valuables with him. Five years of marriage, trust, and effort down the drain.

I'd just managed to get my financial head above water and had hired a divorce lawyer when I got the call. The car crash had killed both of them instantly, but before I could even process the shock, there was more bad news behind it. Evidently, Caleb and Svetlana had set up a sweet little cottagecore life in Vermont, running an artisanal maple syrup business, of all fucking things. The asshole had somehow managed to secretly use our—*my*—mortgage as collateral, and now bills were coming due.

My only option to avoid bankruptcy was to take up the mantle of syrup-making and finish out the season in their stead. I'd booked my ticket, hastily shopped, and flown in on a head of steam: an ugly mix of betrayed fury, heart-wrenching grief, and anger that I felt anything at all for my "husband."

The shitty silver lining of it all was that I was still Caleb's legal wife, regardless of who he was shacking up with. I was given his personal effects after I had identified his body, including his house keys, though it took some digging to figure out where exactly he lived. A sympathetic deputy slid me the address, which turned out to be out in the middle of *nowhere*, though the small house was nice enough.

When I'd driven there yesterday afternoon, I'd been petty, tossing framed photos of them haphazardly into a discarded box with enough force to crack the glass panes. To hell with him, to hell with her, and fuck them both for putting me through a second upheaval. Half a bottle of wine, some loud music, bad singing, and a few hours later, I'd scrubbed out any lingering evidence of the couple and staked my claim. I didn't know the first thing about maple syrup, but that's what YouTube was for. I fell asleep in a state of emotional exhaustion, ignoring my dying phone battery, a mistake I was paying for now.

Shifting the thin metal bucket handles to my other hand, I flexed my fingers to work the stiffness out. Theoretically, I was supposed to be switching out the sap buckets I held for full ones on random maple trees around me, but I'd yet to find a single one. The more immediate problem was that everything around me was starting to look alike, and all the trees were evergreens.

I didn't think I'd been out very long, but the sun looked a lot lower in the sky now. My fingers curled in my glove, stopping myself from trying to check my completely dead phone for the millionth time. *It's bricked, Mila, and that's your own damn fault.* I hadn't charged it before I left the house—there was only one outlet in the bedroom, and the cable didn't reach the bedside table. I knew I shouldn't have been lazy about it, but it was *so* cold last night and I had just wanted to crawl into bed.

I adjusted my backpack with a sigh. For some reason, I thought there'd be...signs, I guess? Some indication of where these supposedly tapped trees were out here. The snow was coming down lightly but steadily; the furthest footprints behind me were gradually filling in. I was losing my patience and the chill was starting to become harder to ignore, even under my coat. I was barely dressed for this. My "cold weather" clothing had been hastily procured from a sparse store back home, where snow fell *maybe* twice a year.

Lulled by a numbing cold and the rhythmic scrunch of snow under my boot soles, I zoned out as I wandered down something that looked vaguely like a path between trees. It might have been a deer run for how overgrown it was, but I thought I'd caught the flash of metal through the evergreen needles. At this point, I'd call finding a single bucket a win. *How long had I been out here, anyway?*

Shrugging off my backpack, I let it thump into the snow beside me, stretching and giving an irritated growl as I looked around. White ground, dense trees. The same view greeted me in every direction, and my footprints behind me were getting harder and harder to see. Not only was the snow falling a little faster now, the afternoon was sliding quickly into early evening, taking the daylight along with it. My heart thudded in my chest as panic started slowly creeping in. I was completely lost.

All the technology I relied on to summon help, find my bearings, and light my way rested like a useless stone in my pocket. I mean, it was *spring*, right? Even in Vermont, it wouldn't get cold enough to actually *die* out here, right? The reflexive pull to hug myself for warmth told me my optimism was unfounded. I had managed to, through a combination of bad preparation and misplaced confidence, get myself into a situation that could kill me. I scrambled to recall hazy memories of my scant few months of Girl Scouts. I'd need shelter and a heat source, first and foremost. Ideally, I'd work on finding my way back instead, but if it was getting dark out, that wasn't an option, not this far out. Without the clock on my phone to consult, I only had the fading light to go by.

Why the hell did I think I could run a goddamn maple syrup farm? Caleb had managed to ruin every aspect of my life, and now, albeit indirectly, he was probably going to end it too. A lump lodged in my throat and a sob poured out of me, raw and anguished. I was terrified, freezing, and this wasn't *fair*. I wasn't proud of the fact that I was losing control, but I was *so mad*. I screeched a string of curses at Caleb that I was pretty sure delved into languages I didn't even know. I picked up one of the *stupid* buckets and slammed it against the nearest tree, over and over again, in a rage. I hoped Caleb could hear me in the afterlife, and I *really* hoped the sound was coming from above him, not below.

By the time I'd finished my tantrum, I was panting and sweaty under my coat, halfway between hysterically crying and hysterically laughing. I was also *exhausted*. I'd predictably slept like shit at the house, and my muscles still ached from my angry cleaning spree. It was getting much darker out now, the moon beginning to rise behind the silhouettes of trees. The cold air rushing into my lungs with my labored breaths felt like knives.

I'd be okay, I just needed to rest for a minute, get my breathing evened out. I'd make a plan. I'd get out of here. The snow continued to fall in bigger clumps, gently settling onto the ground and insulating

even the sound of my panting. I sat on my backpack, leaning up against the tree I'd wailed on with the bucket. A small gust of wind swirled and stung my eyes, so I closed them. It felt comforting, blocking out my predicament, so I kept them closed.

This was bad, I was in danger.

Why am I in danger again?

The brain fog that had settled over me felt like the tail end of being drunk.

I just needed to rest for a minute.

SIER

Alsam never wanted me to interfere with them. It was the way of the woods, he reminded me, to let nature take its course with injured lives out here. I heard his deep, low voice tumble across my memories. *Saving a weakened animal is seldom a kindness, Sier—it only means a more filling meal for a predator later.*

I chose to believe that the tiny birds I placed back in my brethren's branches thrived. That the small rabbits and squirrels and bees I'd fed over the years were grateful and healthy. Winters could be bleak times, even for our kind, and the compassion helped lift my spirits through the frigid months.

She was much larger than a squirrel, however. I had watched her fury explode out of her with surprising force, frowning when she seemed to direct it at one of my brethren. What possible reason could she have to be angry at the trees? She was not raised in this soil—her skin was too soft, she was too tender for the cold here. In time, perhaps, she would grow used to it, but time was not something she had. She'd slumped against the tree and closed her eyes—already the deadliness of winter sleep was curling into her life's light. Hibernation was for beasts with fur, not the pale flesh that showed in faint slivers at her wrists.

Curled up against the tree she'd lashed at, she seemed small and pitiful, more fabric and grief than woman. Though her anger flared with a bite like the wind, she was still softer than my Alsam. So different—rounded where we were not, and rosy, though her color was fading quickly. I tightened my fingers into my palms, willing myself to turn away.

There had been another woman nearby until half a season ago, and she had been sharp and angular, unpleasant as a broken branch. The name the man had used for that one was equally pointed, and I hadn't liked the sound any more than I had liked the woman. Her wheedling and whining at the man was like beetles under my bark, and I was glad when Alsam finally sent them away.

The sharp woman had known about *us*, however, and the ritual words to bind us to a landowner's will. Our kind had grown wild enough that the words were no longer the unyielding shackle they once were, but they were enough. They had compelled us to reveal the secrets of sap and harvest to the ungrateful man and his companion. It was a small blessing that we were conscripted to harvest—we didn't hurt our brethren the way his lazy, greedy mortal hands surely would have.

The man's demands had grown with each harvest, his greed spurred by that of the sharp woman and her needs for glittering baubles and wasted fur. Alsam only let me accompany him once or twice to deliver the sap, and my heart sank to see the ostentatious wealth around their dwelling, bought with our labor and life force. No trees died in our care, we were cautious and caring, but if the demands had continued much longer, things would have taken a turn.

I understood the flow of our world. The way the ice and snow lulled the earth to rest and nourished the land when it woke; the way the sap flowed through our brethren's sturdy trunks. Alsam knew more of the ways of men—he had befriended the old man that once owned the land, long before this odious pair. While I was unused to humans, however, the skill of extraction was a familiar one to me.

Although the man's stinking metal beast was still alien and dangerous-looking, we had decided it was the best way to cull the creeping rot of greed from our grove. While Alsam kept watch, I slid underneath and found where the sap ran through—the softer scent, Alsam had instructed me, like the fish we dried on stones by the lake. A small, fast nick of a stolen harvesting knife, a slow wound that

wouldn't show against the gray stone gravel of the drive. They always went out together every few days, but this time, Gods be praised, they did not return.

We had been bound to his will, yes, but we were *not* bound to protect him. Perhaps if the sharp woman was not such a sapling herself, she might have listened to the caution in the old tales, and not just the rewards. I did not mourn them the way I did the animals and fallen trees; those at least had purpose and inherent dignity.

This soft woman before me, however, was different. With her fury drained away and her features gentled by sleep, she seemed more like the small birds and beasts I lifted back to their nests. She'd wandered far afield, and judging from the buckets she carried, she'd been seeking out the maple trees. Those, however, were on the distant side of the man's dwelling, not here in our grove.

Alsam had warned me more mortals would eventually swarm the dwelling, and perhaps the grove, but this was sooner than we had anticipated. The roots of the grove told me she had come alone, and I suspected the same was true back at the dwelling. These fragile humans seldom ventured alone into our woods, and the scant few had many more layers and heavier packs. As I watched her, she shivered powerfully and her life's light flickered in the core of her, inconstant as a candle flame in a storm. It would fall to the winter's sleep soon, and my heart ached.

I crossed my arms, leaning into the tree beside me, the fir needles brushing my arm gently. I stroked my fingertips along them in return, a gesture of kinship, as I pondered the fading woman. She hadn't come here to give herself to the cold, even as sad as she seemed. *Those* humans, from what Alsam told me, didn't bring provisions with them. Her pack was not nearly full enough for a trek in this wilderness, but it was still there beneath her. The buckets meant she'd come here with a task, however mislaid she had become.

Alsam will be furious, I thought to myself, resigned now. I crossed the clearing, drawn by her transient beauty, as unexpected as an early crocus pushing through the snow. I stooped down, kneeling in the drifts to gather her to me, lifting her comparatively small form against my chest. Her limbs were cold to the touch. I unbuttoned the fleece-lined flannel jacket I wore, stoking my own life's light to warm my skin for her.

In my arms, her head lolled and she gave a soft moan, her brows knit in pain as her body struggled to make use of the life-giving heat. As I trudged through the snow carrying her, I took the opportunity to examine my lost little bird. Her short, dark hair was mussed by the constant movement against my jacket, making her look even softer. I was glad now that Alsam insisted on "appearances" when we left the den—it was the same reason we'd learned to speak man's tongue. It allowed us to move freely among mortals as "hikers." Right now, it also offered my erstwhile charge some warmth against the snow, swirling silently around us.

Even as her existence flickered on the edge of vanishing, her sleep-slackened features looked determined, resolute. I liked that. My heart silently urged her to fight, to live, as she lay cradled in my arms. The weight and nearness of her made me feel strangely warm, the way Alsam's presence did. I was puzzled at the sensation, but I couldn't deny feeling more than a forest steward's draw to her. She shivered powerfully in my arms. Her body was fighting back the winter's sleep, but it was struggling to do so.

I frowned. The way back to the den was still far off, and the wind showed no signs of slowing. I felt no cold, and she did, so the answer was obvious. I didn't feel any other presence in our grove, and I knew Alsam was among the maples today, checking their recovery. He should be there until

evening, at least. I crouched to sit in the snow, settling her across my lap to avoid letting the cold seep into her again. I unzipped my jacket entirely, unbuttoning the flannel beneath it and shrugging both off. I had to move gingerly to avoid letting her tumble into the snow, but soon I had her cocooned in two layers, tucked against my chest as I rose.

Her tangled hair feathered against my chest with every step I took through the ice-crusting snowfall, unseasonably persistent this afternoon. Her cheek was soft against my bare skin, and I marveled once again at the contrast between this small human and my bonded mate. In these forms, Alsam and I were shaped like men, though unnaturally strong if we didn't take care to conceal it. But when we were back in the heart of our grove, if we had no errands that required our attention, that was different. We could bury our roots and stretch our branches to tangle in the sky, free to be ourselves—all bark and needle and magic. This woman was like spider silk and ripened fruit, all plush and give.

Her head slumped heavily against me as I stepped over a fallen log, and the softest part of her I'd felt yet—her lips—touched my skin. Even though they looked painfully dry and wounded by the weather, they still stirred things in me I didn't think humans could. The sturdy denim jeans I wore felt suddenly constricting and uncomfortable, and I longed to feel the bite of snow against my heated skin. I'd get her into the modest home Alsam and I had made, and then I'd settle my roots and take in the snow. It was just exertion, the excitement of finding and saving a human, I told myself over and over. I just needed the cold.

The bite of guilt and shame burrowed into me like a nesting squirrel. I knew all too well that excitement did not stir me *there*. Only Alsam did that. I would not show him disloyalty like this. I'd meet with him when he returned, and perhaps he could *have a talk* with me while the little human recovered. Nothing cleared my mind quite like his particular brand of discussion, which seldom involved words.

Before I could brush away the curiosity, my mind pondered what *having a talk* with my lost little bird would feel like.

ALSAM

The maples were far healthier than I'd hoped, and it lightened my heart to feel the verdant thrum in their roots. Without the constant, demanding pull of the man's greed, my brethren had time to recover and heal old wounds. Even a short respite had made a great deal of difference, judging by the feel of their energy. I had already pulled a small bag's worth of spiles, the hollow tubes driven into the trees to retrieve sap, from some of the weaker trunks. Now that we weren't compelled to bring more than the grove's balanced share, the younger brethren could grow unhindered. My small supply of wooden caps shored up the gaps, ensuring the late winter's bite wouldn't hinder their healing.

I was pleased I wouldn't need to spend the day here now, as I was eager to return to Sier. He had looked at me with heat in his eyes this morning, a desire that pulled at both of us with unspoken promises for later. His hunger for play was insatiable, my bonded, but I was happy to see to it as often as I could. We lived comfortably enough, though pairings were unusual among our kind, more commonly bonded with a grove's worth of dryads. Ancient promises, however, tied my line to this land, and most of our kind disliked the cold enough to settle their roots elsewhere. My sweet Sier was a happy exception, though I'd seen many more seasons pass by than he had. Sometimes, in the dark nights of winter, I struggled with a persistent fear tangled in me like a weed. It whispered that he'd one day want warmer soil, more months to spread his needles and coax those little birds he loved so dearly.

The metallic clink of the spiles in the bag sounded muffled against the sudden accumulation of snow around me. The wind wasn't whipping up a blizzard, but the bite in the air as I trudged back told me one wasn't far off. I smiled. Sier and I would stay in these forms, huddled in our little home, and make plenty of warmth between us. I could already feel the rough fabric of the blanket on my bare chest, the mug of tea in my hand—it was a post-coital indulgence, and a ritual of sorts with us.

I frowned as I pulled another spile, this one driven inexpertly into a tree too young to support it. This was clearly the work of the man, Caleb, a fumbling attempt to tame the woods before he'd found us. I hadn't understood the man's broken relationship with the land, nor the way he doted on his younger mate. He'd called the sharp woman mate *beautiful* and *lovely* reflexively when she preened petulantly. It was a childish—and constant—behavior that grated at both Sier and I. We privately knew the connection between the man and woman was like a limb rotted by termites—sturdy enough to the eye but not fit to support a wren.

Not like the connection I shared with my barksworn. We were as strong as our trees—solid and well-rooted. He was home, to me, as much as the warm shelter we shared when we weren't stretching our branches to the sky. It was that familiarity that told me something had changed—a different scent in the air, a shift in the flow of energy that sheltered us and hid us from prying eyes. I rushed inside, leaving our rough door ajar, fear that Sier was hurt or gone driving me forward.

Instead, he hovered over the bed, completely unharmed and staring with fascination at a prone mortal, small and half-frozen, tucked against our scant bed linens. He turned as he heard me enter, eyes wide in shock.

“Alsam! I—I thought you were in the grove. You're back so early!” He stumbled over the words, clearly unprepared for my sudden appearance. He insinuated himself between the woman and my line of sight, and I gripped my pack's strap angrily at the duplicitous movement.

I frowned, my jaw clenching, my voice a hiss of a whisper to avoid waking her. “Has your brain gone wooden, Sier? Why in the sacred soil have you brought one of *those* into our sanctuary? Did we not *just* rid ourselves of an infestation?”

He straightened, getting that resolute look in his eyes I knew all too well. “She’d have died, Alsam. I couldn’t leave her out there, not in the cold. Look at her, so young. Practically a sapling by their measure of time.”

I let out a huff of derision. “No sapling, my barksworn.” I glanced pointedly at her curves, noticing that her breaths were too slow and shallow. “A woman, just like the other one, and likely twice the trouble. How exactly did you plan on explaining this?” I waved a hand around our large, circular room in irritation. Our furniture was made of thick vines and smooth planes of stumps grown from the ground and walls, like something from the yellowing storybook an old mortal friend once gifted me. She’d notice immediately how alien her surroundings were when – if—she woke.

Sier shifted uncomfortably, moving to kneel beside the bed. I caught myself anxiously watching the rise and fall of her chest, worry worming into me at how it seemed to be slowing. I tried to discourage my mate from rescuing his foundling animals, his broken heart at failures too much for me to bear. This was no animal, however, and the loss of the woman would decimate his too tender heart.

That wouldn’t do.

I wasn’t happy about her strange presence here, but it wasn’t something I could simply uproot right now, not without Sier despising me for it. The snow-wind sang its beautiful song outside, a melody that stirred my soul but promised death for the fragile human on our bed. She’d need to remain here until at least mid-morning tomorrow, if she’d even have the strength to leave by then.

I sighed, thinking back to the long friendship I’d had with the older man that had lived on my lands many years ago. He’d patiently explained many things about humans, about their specific weaknesses. He’d also taught me to read, as I’d taught Sier in turn. I remembered some images, some passages from a small book he’d given me with a red cross on the front.

Plucking the volume off of our small shelf, I flicked through the pages until I found what I was looking for, pointing to the illustration for Sier. “Here. We need to undress her. Her clothes are wet and it will take me a while to start the fire. She’ll freeze through like that.”

He nodded and set a knee on the bed, gingerly peeling up the edge of her shirt, hesitating as he looked back at me. “You’re not angry, Alsam?” His voice grew quiet as he worked one of her limp arms through a sleeve. “I was almost afraid to bring her back.”

I growled with annoyance, busying myself by the meager stone hearth, gathering up the kindling and fallen limbs we used as firewood. “You’re a damned sapling yourself. Of course I’m angry, you’ve shown all the intelligence of a rutting squirrel, Sier! You’ve exposed our safest space, and for what, this half-frozen little fawn?”

I clicked a flint chunk against a small steel bar with more force than was strictly necessary, breathing on the small sparks that drifted onto the pile I’d made. “What happens when she wakes, then? When she asks about the two strange men who live in a magic tree? When she brings an angry mob here, ready to savage the unknown?” I scowled, shoving at the new fire with a spare stick, nearly smothering it with my agitated movements.

“I didn’t think of what comes next, Alsam. I’m sorry.” His voice was sorrowful, and I squeezed my eyes shut, immediately regretting my sharpness. It wasn’t his fault he had a soft heart, and it was one of the things I cherished about him, the way it seemed to soften my own.

“Forget it, we’ll harvest it when it grows.” I waved dismissively, though worry still coiled in my stomach. Sighing with resignation, I stood and watched the fire carefully. “This will still take too long, though. She’s not built for life without warmth.”

Sier passed me her snow-damp shirt and pants as he peeled them off, and together we arranged them on the back of a chair near the fire to dry. I turned to stare at the too pale creature curled atop his shirt and coat on our bed; Sier had left her undergarments on. We ourselves hadn’t much modesty, we had no real need for it, but we understood the mortals did. It seemed foolish to me, really, especially when the weather was more temperate.

She looked so delicate now, with soft blue lace across the swells of her breasts and a brilliant red splash of fabric between her legs. I unbuttoned my own shirt, shrugging it off to drape it on top of her. We only had one blanket for the bed, and even that was more a function of comfort during our lovemaking than a need for heat.

I stoked my life’s light until I felt warmth in my chest, nodding towards the bed. “Come, then. We’ll lay beside her until her breathing steadies and the fire has a chance to grow.” The look of gratitude Sier gave me as he slid his boots off was worth the potential disaster she represented; he typically only turned that sort of adoration to me in the heights of our passion. For better or for worse, this was my barksworn’s desire, and that was enough for me—for now.

We curled into bed, flanking her in what warmth we could offer. Much to my horror, however, the unexpected softness of her skin stoked more than my life’s light. She smelled so different from our woods, like crushed petals instead of rock and river, her chestnut hair silken and damp now from melted ice.

I pulled the covers over all three of us quickly, hoping that Sier wouldn’t see how rigid my traitorous cock had become in my pants—I’d never been so close to a human, not like this, and I didn’t expect her to feel so addicting. I couldn’t stop imagining what she’d taste like, what the swell of her breasts would feel like against the roughness of my palms. Would she cry out in passion, as my Sier did, if I found just the right place to stroke?

My sweet mate couldn’t know that my body craved this foundling, that might break his heart too. She was only an unusual distraction, a novelty, an injured animal to mend and send on its way.

That is all, I thought as I laid my head in the crook of my arm, closing my eyes. *That must be all.*

MILA

My eyes felt glued shut, my mouth dry, and my head pounding. Had it all been a dream, getting lost? Maybe I drank more of that wine than I thought. I shoved the blankets down, frowning sleepily at how lumpy and misshapen they felt. My arm also ached like I'd been weightlifting, and my eyes stung powerfully.

The ceiling didn't look right. The cabin had been made to look aesthetically rustic, but was clearly a new build. This was a different level of wild, with actual vines interlacing all around me. Then a bolt of panic gripped me as I realized I wasn't alone in the bed.

I gasped audibly—*two* men? My eyes flitted from one to the other, both shirtless, both practically torn out of a hot lumberjack calendar. As much as I wanted to high-five myself for landing what looked to be some truly primo bed buddies, I remembered *nothing* about how I'd gotten here. If I hadn't uncorked that wine myself, I'd wonder if I'd been drugged.

The slender man sleepily curled up to me and slung an arm over my waist as if we were lovers cuddling on a lazy Sunday morning. The familiarity of it shocked me, having grown used to not being touched in the years since Caleb left. I hadn't been able to stomach the idea of a fling, let alone a boyfriend, until the divorce was finalized. I guess, technically, I was widowed now, I reminded myself grimly. The feathery chaos of the man's hair gave him a sweet, boyish look I found myself gazing at with unexpected fondness.

Then I peeked under the blanket and swallowed a shriek of alarm. *Where the fuck were my clothes?*

My eyes still hurt, but as the world came back into dim, blurry focus, I could make out silhouettes draped over rough-hewn chairbacks beside a fireplace: my shirt and pants. I closed my eyes against a wave of nausea and memories came rushing back—fury at Caleb, going piñata on that tree with one of those useless buckets, feeling oddly drowsy as the snow picked up.

Oh shit, was I dead?

Oof. I clutched my head as it continued to throb. Not with this headache, I wasn't.

An experimental tug on the blanket found it to be firmly trapped under the slender man to my left. He looked angelic, where the man to my left was more rugged and broad but no less handsome, his lighter brown hair sporting a thin streak of silver-gray. I sighed and slowly extricated myself from both the blanket and the possessive arm, crawling gingerly to the edge of the bed.

I bit my lip as my body scolded me, the wooden floor icy-cold under my bare soles, the still air nipping at my skin until I moved closer to the fire. All of my muscles felt like I'd been put through a blender and hastily reassembled. What the hell had happened out there in the woods? Who were these guys, and why was I half-naked?

As quietly as I could manage with my aching limbs, I pulled on my stiff, dry clothing one piece at a time, wincing at each quiet creak and shuffle. The two men hadn't hurt me, and had likely saved my life, but living in the city had given me a carefully-honed sense of self-preservation. They'd undressed me while I was unconscious, after all, so there was no guarantee they wouldn't take additional liberties. Even if it was just to dry my clothes, it was still unsettling.

I looked over to the bed, surprised to find the two men had curled into one another in my absence. My fear slipped down a few notches on the scale, but I was still getting the hell out of here, back to my cabin. That door had a lock. *They wouldn't come after me, would they?*

I swallowed at the thought, my throat painfully dry—it took every ounce of willpower not to cough. I pushed at the heavy wooden door, which didn't move an inch. I frowned, creeping over to the miniscule kitchen area, where the dwelling's lone, small window resided above the sink. Distressingly lofty snow drifts greeted me in every direction, including the edge of a substantial one beside the front door.

"You aren't going anywhere for a while, little fawn." The voice was a deep rumble, surprisingly soothing. "You also shouldn't be up. We went through all the trouble of pulling you out of death's grip and here you are, eager to run back into it."

Spinning around, I found the larger man sitting up in bed with a bemused smirk. I backed up against the door, my heart hammering. "Who the hell are you? Did you take off my clothes?"

He rolled his eyes—a bright emerald green—and tossed the covers off his legs, rising with a stretch. I was relieved to see he still had pants on, though his naked, muscular torso made my brain trip over itself for a minute. "Perhaps we should have left you to hypothermia, then? Ungrateful little thing, you are. You're *welcome*, by the way, though it's really Sier you should thank—he carried you all the way here."

I glanced at the other man in the bed, still curled in deep sleep. *Carried?* I'd been knocked out?

"Uh. Thank you." I cleared my throat uncomfortably, hating the way my voice croaked. "I—was trying to find sap buckets and the snow caught me by surprise. My phone was dead, and I guess I almost was too. I owe you both, I suppose. I don't have much to offer, but I can bring you maple syrup? Once I figure out how to make it, that is."

He laughed, a warm sound that made the small, cozy space feel a little less alien. "Oh no, you'll find we haven't much use for it, but it's appreciated. I'm surprised you were out wandering our woods alone, a slip of a girl like you. You don't seem used to this climate. You're certainly not dressed for it."

I blushed deeply. "My -" I hesitated, caught between attraction to the handsome stranger that saved my life and basic self-preservation. "My husband, Caleb, owns these woods. He runs a small maple syrup farm."

A dark look evaporated the gently teasing expression the larger man had worn. I tensed again, my earlier fears renewed—he was obviously mad I wasn't single. I babbled nervously, my fingers worrying at the wood behind me. "He's—he was out deer hunting and probably looking for me. He has lots of guns and is really, really jealous so I should probably get going."

He advanced on me slowly, planting a palm against the door behind me and looming over me, crowding me against the door. My heartbeat fluttered, fight or flight instincts making my limbs feel cold as I flushed with adrenaline. "We rescue you, we save your life, and you lie to me so boldly?" His jaw clenched angrily. "Your *Caleb* was a greedy, thoughtless *coward*, and he mated himself to that wretch of a woman, Svetlana. He would have pissed himself if he tried to hold a gun, and the idea of him nobly running to your rescue is laughable. The world is better off without them."

My eyes widened as I shrank back against the door, a mere inch of space between the man's bare chest and my own. Not only had he known Caleb and Svetlana, he also knew they were dead, something that only the police and myself should know. "Okay. Okay, my *estranged* husband, all right? Listen, I wake up in a strange bed between two half-naked guys without my clothes on, what the fuck am I supposed to think, man? Also—*back up*."

I stomped my foot for emphasis, glaring at him. With nowhere to go and my tenuous attempt at a

threatening story punctured, all I had left was making myself more trouble than I was worth. He huffed in amusement, shoving off the door and backing up a step. He smelled like earth and crushed pine needles, all mixed with the sharp, clean scent of snow. I almost swayed towards it, inexplicably disappointed to be robbed of it.

I shoved off the door myself, needing to move, nervous energy making me twitchy. A cramp sliced up my thigh as I resettled my weight, making the rest of my body seize in sympathy as I yelped and pitched forward. Rather than the jarring impact of the ground, I found myself caught in strong, surprisingly cool arms. Instead of steadying me, however, he swept me up into a bridal carry and matter-of-factly deposited me on one of the two chairs at the table.

“You will stay here and rest. You will not disrespect the effort we’ve put into keeping you alive. The snow is impassable anyway, and we’re likely all stuck in here until the afternoon sun melts it back. I’m going to make tea and you’re going to sit there and behave. Understand?” He folded his arms across his chest as I nodded meekly. Anyone that could manhandle me that easily could break me in half if he wanted to, and there was no reason to piss him off when his request was logical. The independent woman in me balked at my compliance, but a darker, deeply buried part of me secretly relished the gruff care. Caleb had never taken care of me this way, and it was nice, if odd.

“I’m Mila,” I spoke quietly, pitching my voice to the gruff one, not wanting to disturb the man who’d apparently saved my life.

“Alsam. The one on the bed is Sier, my barksworn.” His voice softened on the unfamiliar term, a fond cast to his eyes telling me they were, in fact, connected.

“Barksworn?” I asked, curiously, sitting up a little to peek at what he was doing.

Alsam gave a non-committal grunt, taking the dented kettle from the stove. He deftly folded a dish towel, sliding it between the kettle’s bottom and the tabletop as he sat. “Our roots entwine.”

“So that means you two are—” I shifted slightly, hoping to relieve the tension knotting in my shoulders from staying in this position. “—married? Partners?”

He scoffed. “Human things. We are more than your shallow ceremonial trappings. Your promises are so easily broken, like twigs gone dry.”

He tilted the kettle over the cup, sending a thin plume of earthy, smoky steam billowing up as it filled. He leaned over it, taking a deep, satisfied inhale before settling against the chair with a contented look. I watched with interest as the lines of his face softened; this was clearly a familiar ritual for him.

Wait—did he just say humans? I stared at him in confusion. Oh, shit, were these guys crazy? Had I been rescued by two off-the-grid psychos?

Amusement danced across his features as he cracked open an eye, feeling my scrutiny and misinterpreting it. “You watch me so intently, little fawn. Have you never had...tea...before?” He raised a brow in question, wrapping those broad hands around the cup and practically dwarfing it.

“None that smelled like a...campfire. And dirt. What’s in that, anyway?”

He smirked, and the expression changed his features in a way that made me squirm with a spark of unexpected heat. “As I said, tea. A variety called Russian Caravan. Would you like to try it?”

I blinked, startled, before giving a hesitant nod. I’d hoped he would offer water eventually, but this was an unexpected intimacy of kindness. Before I could change my mind, he’d planted his palms on the smooth tabletop and risen to his full, impressive height—he must have been at least six feet and some change. He carefully cradled the cup, coming over to my side of the table and hooking the toe of

his boot under the chair rail beneath me. He smoothly dragged the chair sideways, even with my full weight on it, and tipped the very edge of the cup against my lips, waiting for me to lean back.

We stared at one another, my heartbeat hammering all over again. He was a man, offering me tea, for God's sake, it shouldn't feel this intense. Instead, all I could think about was the fascinating contrast between his large hands and the comparatively delicate mug, and a persistent thought about how he'd feel holding *me* like that. Then there was the sensation of being *given* tea, instead of being handed a mug, as if the choice was barely my own. I felt drunk on the experience, this strangely intimate encounter so soon after escaping death in the snow.

I tilted my head ever so slightly, and he followed suit with the edge of the cup. It was just barely below uncomfortably hot, though it did an excellent job of chasing off my lingering chill. Used to generic black tea, the smoke of it tumbled across my tongue, laced with an earthy sweetness that lingered on my lips. He withdrew the cup, taking a long sip himself without taking his eyes off of me.

He shattered the tension of the moment by dropping back into his chair, sliding the cup over to me. "Mila. There is a delicate matter to discuss. You say you were wed to Caleb, yes? His wife?"

I couldn't shove down a moue of distaste at the thought I'd been legally bound to the creep. "Yes, unfortunately. A mistake of being young and idealistic. He left me for Svetlana two years ago, unexpectedly."

Alsam mirrored my scowl, washing it away with another sip of tea. "A truly unpleasant creature, that woman. He had very poor taste, to abandon such beauty for that shrill bundle of debris."

I blushed furiously, dropping my gaze to the tabletop. Gentle fingertips, warm from his mug, lifted my chin back up to meet his eyes. His touch lightly swept my cheek, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear. "Mila, have you ever heard of dryads?"

I raised a brow at the sudden shift in conversation, as well as the unexpected contact. Flirting to fairy tales? Yeah, this guy was definitely certifiable, but the fleeting warmth on my cheek certainly caught my interest. "I mean, I guess so? I learned a little in a college mythological studies class—those are tree people, right? Pretty, skinny women?"

Alsam sighed and set his cup down. "Some, yes. Others are...different. Men. With foliage made for colder climes." He turned his palm up, and impossibly, a small pine sapling sprung from it, the same deep green as his eyes. I moved to jolt backwards, but he'd preemptively hooked his foot under the chair rail again to prevent the distance. He pressed a shushing finger to his own lips with his free hand, nodding towards the still sleeping Sier.

"There's no sense dancing around it, little fawn. We are dryads, Sier and I, and bound by magic in this land to the will of your former husband. If you were still his wife by the customs of your people when he died, that binding extends to you now."

SIER

I woke in an empty bed, my sleepy palms clutching for the warmth of Alsam and finding only a tangle of our clothes and a rumpled blanket that smelled faintly and curiously of flowers. I sat bolt upright, recalling how we'd drifted to sleep. *The woman!* Where was she?

I scrubbed at my eyes, hearing the low rumble of my barksworn's voice and the higher, melodic tones that must belong to the woman I'd saved. *My little bird.* My heart warmed to know she was conscious, and that Alsam was undoubtedly caring for her. For all of his protests, he never balked at feeding stranded animals, or tending to their wounds, particularly if I was asleep or unable to.

She was at the table, holding Alsam's mug and hastily downing swallows of hot tea as she stared sightlessly at the wall. I raised a brow, wondering if he'd cleaned it beforehand, or brewed new tea—they'd clearly been talking for a while, so he must have.

"So you're telling me you're some kind of...forest spirits? That's insane!" She leaned forward, barely touching the tip of her finger to the tiny little sapling, eyes wide with wonder. "How the hell did you make a *tree* grow out of your—"

I cleared my throat. "I apologize for sleeping so deeply, I've been a poor host, but yesterday was a little taxing on all of us, I think. I'm Sier. I'm glad to see you're feeling better."

The woman smiled softly and I was struck by her beauty once more. "Mila. Alsam told me you saved my life. Thank you for that."

Alsam, my gentle giant, filled another mug with tea and brought it over to me. I caught his palm as the tiny tree vanished, pressing a kiss to the center of it. He cupped my cheek, sweeping his thumb over my cheekbone with a fond smile that faded all too quickly. "Mila was just telling me she is *Caleb's* wife, Sier."

My stomach dropped. I'd unwittingly saved the woman that essentially owned us now—we'd been free for a few blessed days, and now we were compelled to the will of a mortal again. What if her greed was as consuming as theirs had been? Could Alsam and I kill again?

My heart quailed at the thought of hurting the little bird I'd saved. I didn't want to hurt Mila. She made me feel like Alsam did—emotions that Caleb and his sharp woman, Svetlana, had never remotely inspired.

She set the mug down and held her hands up in a gesture of surrender, shaking her head at us. "I was already working with a divorce lawyer, I definitely don't personally consider myself his wife or widow, I swear. I'm sorry if he—if he hurt you two in some way. He was a shit, and God help me, I'm not sorry he's gone. If you want, you can bid on the property when it's foreclosed on—I'm sure it won't be long now."

She looked defeated as her voice tapered off, closing her eyes and running her hands back through her hair as her voice tightened. "I don't know why I ever thought I could run a maple syrup farm anyway. My first day out, I almost kill myself from exposure without a drop of sap to show for it."

I pushed off the covers, giving Alsam's hand a squeeze before I moved over to Mila, settling on my knees in front of her to meet her eyes. "Little bird, Alsam and I can help. In fact, we *must* help, if you ask us to, but I'm hoping you won't. I'm hoping you have a better heart than your husband did."

Alsam stood at my side, laying a palm heavily on my shoulder. "Mila, you can release us from the magical binding Caleb used to compel us, and we will help gladly, and do more for you than we ever did for him. But you should know that we will not tolerate anything hurting our grove." He closed his

eyes with a sigh. “You should also know that we’ve killed to protect it.”

Realization dawned slowly on her face as the weight of his tone sunk in. “No. No, that can’t be. You can’t mean—he died in a car accident. There were no other vehicles involved, the police said!”

I straightened my spine and locked eyes with her, not ashamed of what I’d done to protect my own. “We did. *I* did, Mila. He was killing the grove for his own profit! It would have died, something older than the age of man, and he didn’t care. He’d have made us endlessly kill our own kind to supply that terrible woman with meaningless baubles. It was not a decision made lightly, but it *was* one that we made. We cut a line of fluid and caused the accident. We did it to save our grove.”

I didn’t like the fear that flashed in her eyes, but she deserved to know what we were capable of, how far we’d go to safeguard what was ours. We’d both been through hell under the compulsion, and I had no desire whatsoever to return to that way of life.

She grasped the mug again in shaking hands, draining it. She sat silent for a long minute, looking distant as she weighed a thousand things behind her eyes, her words tumbling out quickly. “All right. God forgive me. All right. You’ll help me? What do I need to do?”

Alsam took the mug back from her before she dropped it, gently taking her hand between his two considerably larger ones. “Caleb made us tap the grove—our land—for his own gratification. To voluntarily unravel the binding, we must tread the same path in the opposite direction.”

She tilted her head at me. “I...don’t understand. Do you two need to take something from the land, then?”

I smiled softly, suddenly understanding what Alsam intended. “No, Mila. *We* are the land, we cannot take from ourselves, only give. We need to take from *you*, but it must also be freely given.”

“So what, my—my blood?” She hunched into the chairback, her voice wavering fearfully.

Alsam chuckled, opening his hands to press a kiss to the back of hers. “No, little fawn. While that *would* satisfy the debt, we would not have you give your life for your former mate’s sins. I had a considerably more pleasant extraction method in mind. I am older, but not ancient—not so dull I’d miss the way my barksworn looks at you.”

Mila swallowed and looked at me hesitantly, still on my knees in front of her. “And...how is that exactly?”

Alsam’s hand lightly tangled in the back of my hair, the way it often did just prior to my favorite sort of play. My pulse quickened reflexively and I felt my cock stir to life, anticipating the things that always followed. His voice dropped to the deep growl I adored. “The same way I do.”

I sighed with the delicious tension of longing and anticipation, whispering to her, “Say yes, Mila. Please. Free us and we’ll make it a very pleasurable experience for you. I promise.” I held my hand just beside her thigh, watching her face, but not touching her skin. Alsam’s modest collection of books included a smaller, purple-covered one filled with intriguing illustrations. We’d recreated many ourselves, but there were more than a few we needed a body like Mila’s to explore. I was very eager to do just that.

When she deliberately let her leg relax into my grip, I smiled. *She was ours.*

I bent my brow to rest against her knee, raising my head to kiss it softly. She watched me, teeth worrying at her plush lower lip. “Yes, on one condition.”

Alsam skimmed a fingertip along her jaw, tilting it up to draw her attention. “And what might that be?”

Her fingers slid into my hair, entwining with Alsam’s against the back of my scalp.

“Let the dead rest. I never want to hear his name again.” Her jaw flexed as she clenched her teeth, enraged at the man who’d hurt her, who’d taken another mate, who’d hurt our grove.

“As you command, my pretty little bird,” I murmured reverently against her thigh. “As you command.”

ALSAM

I admired the pretty picture the two of them made—the tanned nape of Sier’s neck against Mila’s pale hand. Sier had, however, brought her here without asking me first—I felt stealing the first kiss from her was a fair trade for the trespass. I tilted her chin up with my fingertips again—such a delicate thing, she was—and lowered my face to hers.

I placed a soft kiss on her forehead, brushing small wisps of her hair back. “Remember, we can only take what is freely given. If we hurt you, or if you’d like us to stop, please tell us. The binding was forced on us, and there needs to be complete consent to unravel it.”

She made a soft hum of assent, tilting her head back with a shy smile. Unable to resist any longer, I pressed my lips to hers, reveling in the softness that met me. I cupped her cheek, deepening the kiss as she parted her lips for me, devouring her slowly with teasing strokes of my tongue against hers.

I could feel her connection, the roots of her human spirit, as she bent to my quiet will. It was broken and brittle, but a tiny thread of green was beginning to wrap around the places where she was severed. Sier and I—she was already opening her heart to the possibilities of us, our lost little fawn. She was a fragile treasure meant to be cherished, and I was pleased all over again we’d ended that man’s worthless life. We would succeed where he had failed so miserably, we’d happily mend what he’d broken.

I traced her lower lip with the tip of my tongue, just for a moment, before relinquishing my hold, reluctantly. “Sier, take her to bed.”

He rose, beaming, and held his hands to her to help her up. My cock swelled at the slight daze in her eyes, the way her lips were just slightly swollen—I couldn’t wait to see her even more disheveled. As Sier led her to the bed and kneeled again to help slide her boots off, I reached for my pack, which jangled with a metallic clatter. She looked up curiously, every inch the nickname I’d given her, a small, startled creature in an unfamiliar space. I smiled indulgently as my fingertips navigated the spiles inside by feel, plucking out the one I wanted.

Blunted and polished smooth at the penetrating edge, the hollow metal tube ended in a rounded, tapered point at the other end. Her eyes widened as she spotted it in my hand, and I let my gaze wander her still clothed body with predatory heat. “We’ve never had the pleasure of a mortal female before—my books tell me you have sap of your own to sample.” I moved closer to the bed, rotating the spile slowly in my fingertips. “I intend to harvest it. You’ll sweeten my tea, little fawn, just as Sier does.”

A dark smile twisted my lips at her little gasp of realization. “Oh yes. You’ve already tasted Sier, my beauty. I have no need of sugar when something so sweet already warms my bed. And now—” I slid my hand along her stomach, under her stiff, dry shirt, until my fingertips grazed the lace of her bra. “—I have even less need of it.”

Sier grasped the edges of her shirt, tugging it off her body before busying himself with removing her bra. His brows drew together and he threw me a covert look of panic over her shoulder, and it was all I could do not to laugh. My poor barksworn, confounded by clasps. Truthfully, I might have been too, had Svetlana not left one of her women’s magazines out in the grove a few months ago. I did not fully comprehend the reason mortal women wore these devices, though I couldn’t deny the aesthetic pleasure of them. The article I read seemed to suggest only that some were less terrible than others—Mila would likely be grateful to have hers removed.

I bent over the bed, kissing Mila again as my fingertips traced the back of her bra, taking over for Sier. To my relief, the style was the simple one I'd already seen on the glossy magazine pages. A quick tug and a brief moment later, the garment fell into her lap. My hands eagerly found their way to the lush globes of her breasts, massaging and soothing the marks the vicious metal under-curve had left behind. Her skin there was just as warm and silky as I'd imagined it would be, and I cupped one of her breasts for Sier as he leaned down, flicking his tongue across the nipple.

Mila groaned, her palm resting against the back of his head in encouragement. "Oh! *Yes.*" She whimpered softly. "Alsam?" Her eyes were as sweet and beseeching as a doe's, and I couldn't deny her a thing. I nudged Sier to shift her more closely to the center of the bed, sitting on her other side and mirroring my mate. Her skin tasted sensational, warm and just slightly salty, the faint scent of her arousal hampered by the clothing she still wore. I ran my tongue slowly across her nipple, making her nails clutch at my shoulder as she gave a soft, bird-like cry. I liked that, and I wanted to hear more.

I cupped her sex firmly through her pants, pressing tentatively until I felt her hips lift to my touch. Ahh, *there* was that special place I'd read so much about. Surer now, I unbuttoned her pants and, together with Sier, slid them down her legs to puddle at the base of the bed. Shuffling up to sit with my back to the headboard, I traced my palm between her heated skin and the edge of her bright red panties. Further down, my middle finger slid into delectable arousal, brushing the intriguing little bud at the top—her clit, the books had called it. I kept my fingertips light, concerned I'd hurt her—Sier and I were, after all, incredibly sturdy—but she grabbed my hand and pressed it against herself more firmly.

"Won't. Break." She panted, her back arching lightly off the bed as I gave her the pressure she wanted. "God, that feels good." She crooked a finger at Sier, who had been watching us with rapt fascination. He laid beside her at her urging, making a delighted sound as she finally pulled him close for a kiss, an obvious erection straining at his pants. A few minutes later, he sucked in a breath and went rigid, that same look of panic snapping back into his features.

I lifted my head, looking at him curiously, slowly realizing that Mila's hand had vanished, her wrist behind the waistband of his pants. I grinned, teasing her entrance with two fingertips as her thighs parted even further in invitation. "He'll do just about anything you ask, now. Sier enjoys being touched and teased immensely, don't you, my sweet barksworn?"

He nodded frantically, his eyelids fluttering closed as a mischievous grin tugged at the corners of Mila's luscious mouth, her fingers working some magic on him I couldn't see.

I took the opportunity to slide her underwear off entirely, cupping her hips in my hands as I settled on my stomach between her legs. Remembering her earlier desire for pressure, I pressed my mouth against her, firmly licking with the flat of my tongue and marveling at her taste. It was so different from my Sier—it was addictive and primal, and I wanted all of it.

She gave another of those delicious cries, and I felt the bed shift as Sier backed out of her grasp to shove his pants down. A moment later, his hands busied themselves at my waist, sliding under me to undo my own pants, dragging them off by the cuffs as I continued to lap at Mila. Her naked legs draped over my shoulders as I slid my palms under her ass, holding her to my mouth like a feast.

MILA

Some tiny, distant voice in my brain was absolutely *flipping* out, but it was like the whine of a mosquito next to what Alsam was doing with that glorious mouth of his. Standing at the end of the bed to get Alsam's pants off, Sier proved that my brain was absolutely not overexaggerating the size of the shaft I'd just had my hand around. They'd changed as they shed their clothing, their skin taking on the visual patterns and grooves of bark, though Sier's skin still felt smooth. Both of their eyes were a deeper green, and they were at least a foot taller, making me feel diminutive. The scent of fresh wood and deep, clean earth permeated the entire room.

Fucking around with a pair of magic, shirtless tree guys that had basically found me in the forest was probably not my brightest idea, but then again, if it wasn't for them, I would have died yesterday. So, I hastily reasoned, everything from here on out was a bonus, right? After two long, celibate years of digging myself out of Caleb's selfish choices, it was time to do what *I* wanted. I'd carried the bitter, lonely weight of anger for too long and it had nearly killed me.

Between my legs, Alsam's hair was interspersed with soft, slender green needles that stroked and prickled against my thighs. I ran my fingers through them, fascinated but skittish still, and he rewarded my curiosity with slow, firm circles of his tongue that made my toes curl.

He stopped doing that delightful swirling thing with his tongue for a moment, sliding one of his hands out from under me to pull Sier's face to his own. His warm hand cupped me again as his lips crashed into Sier's, rough fingertips sliding reverently through the wet slick he'd coaxed from me, teasing us both at once. I watched the men share a passionate kiss, sighing happily as Alsam's thumb stroked down my clit. If I'd thought they were gorgeous separately, they were even sexier together.

Alsam cupped Sier's cheek, smiling darkly at him. "Are you ready, sweet one? Our little fawn needs more from us, I think."

They both turned to look at me then, their twin looks of hunger heating my skin the way standing in front of the fire had. *Our* little fawn, he'd said. Why did that make my pussy clench around nothing? The word washed over me the way his tongue had while it explored the most intimate, pleasurable places on my body. I wanted more of both.

Alsam lifted his hand, sparking a little whimper of protest from me before I could stop myself. He chuckled as he slowly sucked on the two fingers he'd dipped in me, licking my taste from them with relish before moving back and guiding his companion between my legs. Sier bent down to kiss me again, the thick, heavy heat of his shaft sliding against me as my body grew impatient for more. I canted my hips, angling him against my entrance with a needy sound.

His eyes—a softer green than Alsam's, but still incredibly intense—widened, his pupils blown with lust. "Mila. *Mila*." He whispered my name like a prayer, settling his body against mine and hesitantly thrusting forward to meet me.

He gasped and trailed off into a long, satisfied moan as I wrapped my legs around his hips, pulling him in until he bottomed out, sparing him the trepidation. Sex both was and wasn't a skill that faded—the movements were familiar, but the stretch of his width tested my limits, forcing us to take things more slowly than my libido demanded. His cock had a slight upward curve that proved a fantastic distraction, and the stretch soon settled into comfort. He touched his forehead to mine as he began to move, slowly and fluidly, in and out.

"Ahh, my sweet, soft little bird. You feel *so* good. We're going to make you sing for us." He

tensed, fighting himself for control before draping my leg over his shoulder. He brushed his cheek against the side of my knee softly as he thrust harder, looking down at me with so much desire it took my breath away.

Movement caught my eye, and my gaze drifted to the side of the bed, where Alsam stood stroking himself slowly, watching us. I reached a hand out, brushing his cock with my fingertips as Sier began to rut me in earnest now, grinding himself against me the way I had hoped he would. Reaching out, my fingers brushed Alsam's hip to bring him closer, coaxing him over until his thighs touched the edge of the mattress. He watched me, bemused, until I had him close enough to trace his cockhead with my tongue. The soft gasp I drew from the larger dryad made me clench around Sier.

He groaned happily as Alsam joined us, shifting my leg back to his hip so he could lean down and enjoy his partner with me. Alternating between sipping kisses against my lips and tracing his tongue along Alsam's shaft with me, we made him a conduit of our own pleasure. Alsam loosely wound his fingers through our hair, holding our mouths against either side of his cock with a feral grin. It was a wet, delightfully messy tangle of oral fixation, and the debauchery called to something dark and buried in me.

Half-pinned against me by his companion's hold, Sier shifted to shallow, rolling thrusts that added more friction with each stroke. We moved against one another frantically, chasing our desires into one another, even as we both worked to drive Alsam over the edge. I felt drunk and giddy with the adrenaline of being caught between them, held and pinned by hands and bodies as Sier broke against me like a wave, his panting cries of ecstasy muffled by his lover's cock as he came deep inside me, grinding his hips down with purpose.

I clutched at Sier's shoulder and arched up into him, unable to resist the pull of my own climax any longer. The bark of his skin was more prominent now, rough textures under my fingertips at his shoulders and the sides of his arms as he lost himself to pleasure. He fucked me through my climax, drawing out every last second of it, while Alsam's gentle fingers on my cheek turned my head, the gesture a question against my flushed skin. I parted my lips in invitation, and he didn't hesitate, sinking in as deep as I could take him. While he did his best to show restraint, I could feel his need as tangibly as the pulse in his cock, and it only took a few short thrusts before he gripped the headboard of the bed with his free hand, tightening the other in my hair with a curse.

He whispered my name as he tensed, fingers curling tight in my hair. The tension snapped as he splashed across my tongue, jet after jet of strangely sweet, earthy cum that he pushed into the back of my mouth with a satisfied groan. He stroked my hair softly as I sucked and licked him clean—I'd always enjoyed this particular act, and hadn't indulged in it for far too long. He eased back, chuckling as my tongue followed his retreat for a moment before sweeping across my lower lip. His voice was rough, hungry, and deep. "Such a good girl, little fawn. And do you know what good pets get?"

I loved his strength and presence, his tone; it all made me feel small and cherished. His thumb slid across my wet bottom lip, slowly, teasing me. I flicked my tongue across the encroaching digit with a soft noise of inquiry, looking up at him through my lashes.

He drew in a breath through his teeth, sliding just the tip of his thumb into my mouth, mimicking what we'd just been doing. "They get more, don't they, Sier?"

Sier nodded and bent to kiss between my breasts eagerly, a featherlight touch of his lips that made me shiver. Alsam retrieved the strange metal tube he'd shown me earlier, handing it to Sier with a knowing smile. I looked between them, confused, then distracted as Sier eased himself out of me,

slowly and carefully. I sighed with pleasure, letting my eyes drift closed.

I let out a squeak of surprise a moment later as the cold kiss of metal slid against my entrance. Snapping my eyes open in alarm, I found Sier watching me intently, his expression peaceful and affectionate. A glance down told me he was sliding the metal tube into me an inch or two while Alsam looked on, an excited glint in his eyes. He held a small glass jar in his hands, turning it to and fro as if he couldn't keep his hands still.

“What are—” I tried to sit up a little and move myself back from whatever they were doing. Alsam's hand splayed lightly on my chest, stopping the movement. “Shhhh. It's all right. I'm taking what you offered, what I said I'd take, that's all. It is still freely given, yes?” I nodded and relaxed, remembering the binding as my lust-hazed brain gradually centered itself. Sier gently wiggled the smooth metal to sit where he wanted it, parting my thighs a little wider. The metal had already warmed to my body temperature, but the sensation was definitely strange. Alsam rounded the bed, handing Sier the jar before leaning over me to run his tongue over my nipple, torturously slow, crawling back into bed beside me. I whimpered, still sensitive from my earlier orgasm, then yelped softly in surprise as Sier ducked down without warning to lap at my clit.

Alsam banded a powerful arm across my chest, holding me firmly to the mattress and pinning my arms at my sides. He lifted his head to growl at my ear, nipping softly at my earlobe. “You belong to the land now, Mila, and that means *that* belongs to me. Let it happen, little fawn—come for me, now. Give me your sweetness. I'm going to relish *every single drop* of you.” I writhed in his grip, ecstasy arcing through me as I gasped, bucking against Sier's seeking mouth, his hands clutching my hips as I came again, hard. Alsam's steady, rumbling voice interspersed filthy promises and soft praise as I drifted back down from my peak like a feather. He pressed a kiss to my temple and I felt the bed shift as he left my side. I started to open my eyes to ask him to stay, but Sier joined me before I could, gathering me against his chest. Alsam parted my legs and carefully removed the metal tube as I relaxed, and a soft clink of glass sounded before the blanket was pulled up to my shoulder.

I dozed, completely sated and exhausted, while Sier stroked my hair. I hazily dreamed of green pine needles and crisp white snow falling around a warm, welcoming campfire. When I opened my eyes, the dim light of evening showed through the lone window, silhouetting Alsam as he poured tea into a pair of mugs. He was still nude, which was just fine with me—he made delightful eye candy, and I was growing fond of the streaks of green needles peeking through his hair.

Sier shifted his chest beneath my cheek, reaching to accept his cup of tea from Alsam—from the scent, more of the blend he'd given me earlier. Sier inhaled the steam deeply and smiled, taking a long sip before tilting his head at me. “Welcome back to the waking world, little bird. Rest well?”

I stretched lightly, smiling. “Better than I have in a very long time. Thank you, both of you. Can I have some tea, too?”

They shared a long, indecipherable look between them. Alsam cleared his throat. “Mila, I should not have given you the tea earlier without telling you, that wasn't kind of me and I didn't have your consent. I apologize deeply for that. It...this—” He lifted his own mug in indication. “—means something different, for us. It's a little ritual Sier and I share, a way to reaffirm our connection to each other, and to the land. Very old dryad fertility magic.”

My gaze drifted to the small glass jar on the counter, which had only a faint liquid residue at the very bottom. I clapped a hand to my mouth as my brows shot up, realizing it was the one he'd brought to bed with us. “Is—I mean, did you...am *I* in that tea?” I blurted out, blushing. Sier's seductive smirk

answered the question for me.

Alsam took a long, deliberate sip and winked over the rim of his mug. “You are, little fawn, and I think Sier would agree it’s the best tea I’ve ever brewed. I added a bit while you two were dozing, too. You’re both so damned lovely to look at, couldn’t help it.” Beside me, Sier grinned knowingly, thumb tracing the rim of his own mug.

I fiddled with the edge of the blanket for a moment, nibbling my lower lip. “But, Alsam, how am I supposed to toast my new business partners without a drink of my own?”

Alsam made a rough sound of pleasure, filling his mug again and kneeling beside the bed. “If you drink with us now, I want you to drink with us from now on. But be aware the longer you complete this ritual with us, the more it will tie you to the land—as well as Sier and I. You’ll even feel the trees as we do, in time. But if you leave, you will *always* feel a powerful longing to return.”

Sier’s soft voice sounded beside me as he kissed my cheek. “You are lovely and wild yourself, and we have no wish to cage you, Mila.”

The house I’d left to travel here had long since become a place to get mail and sleep; the warmth of home had left two years ago and I’d been chasing it unsuccessfully ever since. I wanted to be cared for and to care for someone that deserved it, this time. Two someones, in fact. If my late husband could throw caution to the wind to chase something that made his heart race, so could I.

I took the mug from Alsam without a word, drinking it until I was gasping for air and nothing remained. Sweet and smoke and just a hint of something sharper tumbled across my tongue. I coughed, swiping the heel of my hand against my mouth. “It’s not a cage if *I choose* it, Alsam. Too many choices have been made for me. I’m making this one myself.”

My world became a sharp scent of evergreen needles and warm bodies as they embraced me between them. As I squeezed them right back, some hardened, brittle part of my heart let out a trickle of something golden, sweet, and wonderful: hope.

Foundling Grove Maples became something of an overnight success, famous for their company policy of generous donations to forest conservation efforts. Thanks to a timely rebranding from the business’s new owner, Mira Alsier, it swiftly became one of the most well-known artisan syrup providers in the region. When asked how she managed it all with no background in the industry, Ms. Alsier simply credited the hard work of her two silent partners, as well as sweetening her coffee with a small, private reserve of syrup each morning.

Thank you so much for reading Sap, Snow, and Spile! If you enjoyed the poly affection, connections, and heat between these characters, be sure to check out my Carnal Cryptids series, starting with
Carnal Cryptids: East Coast!

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The Holiday Hedonism Series (*Cowritten with J.L. Logosz*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An unapologetic book-huffer and devourer-of-stories, Vera Valentine has carried on a torrid love affair with the written word for nearly all of her 39 years. Grown in the diner-laden wilds of the New Jersey Pine Barrens and transplanted to North Carolina, she lives with her husband, seven cats, and two dogs, most of whom are house trained. An avid fan of the Paranormal Reverse Harem genre, she tossed her author hat into the ring in September of 2021 and never looked back.

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If you'd like to stay in touch and up-to-date on Vera's latest projects, pop by www.ValentineVerse.com to follow her on social media, sign up for the ValentineVerse Newsletter, and more! :)



THE ORGRE'S PET
KASSANDRA CROSS

BLURB

We all knew never to go into the woods at night...

It's been years since I visited the town I grew up in. So it's just my luck that on my first night back I'm hassled by some jerk in a bar and have to make a run for it.

When we were kids we were always told to stay away from the woods. That if we went inside, then we would never return.

Now I'm running directly into them, away from one monster, but straight into the arms of another. I've been captured by The Ogre. A hungry beast who eats everything he takes, and who lives off flesh and fear. But when he gets his hands on me, he decides he doesn't want to eat me like the others.

This Ogre wants to punish me for coming into his forest.

And once he's done, he might just keep me as his pet.

CONTENT WARNING

This story features adult themes including dubious consent, abduction, suggested threat and violence, a big old monster appendage and one very hungry ogre.

OGRE'S PET

When we were kids, we all knew never to go into the woods at night. They were dark and deep and sat on the edge of town like a warning. They told us not to come too close. To stay away. That if we went inside then we wouldn't return. They were the stories our parents told us, and their parents before them. Stories that went back generations and clutched at your heart, the fear of the unknown more powerful than the pull of curiosity. Some days we would stand on the edge and look up at the trees. Thick, dense green boughs, their rough trunks swaying in the wind. There was a certain lure. Sometimes you could even hear the singsongs coming from deep within. The songs of the people that were lost. The ones who didn't resist. We often dared each other to be the next to take that step, but we never did...

Because we all knew never to go into the woods at night.

I'd drunk too many shots before I noticed my so-called friends had gone and I was stuck at the bar with no way home. His eyes were leery and his arm draped around my shoulder, his fingers digging into my ribs as he whispered in my ear.

I turned my head to the side, hoping he'd get the hint but I could tell I wasn't going to be that lucky. This guy had been putting in work for an hour, and now we'd been left alone it was clear he thought he was in with a chance. I grabbed my bag and pulled it onto my shoulder, not looking at him and trying to out slip his grip.

"Where do you think you're going?" He mumbled against my ear, his breath hot and sticky with liquor.

"Home," I told him, as I tried not to roll my eyes.

As I pushed the door open and stepped out into the cool night I sighed and looked around. The road was deserted and so was the parking lot. I rifled around in my bag searching for my phone, and when I pulled it out I tapped it alive to scroll to the taxi app. Before I had the chance to order I heard the door swinging open behind me and I knew it was him before I even turned around.

"Hey," he said, his voice a drunken drawl. "You can't just leave, the night isn't over."

"It is for me," I told him, not tearing my eyes away from the phone in my hands.

I'd been polite and played nice until now, but I desperately wanted to shake him. A surface-level chat standing in a crowded bar did not equal access to my body.

He slapped the phone out of my hand with a smirk and it bounced down the steps and into the dusty mud at the side of the road.

"Hey," I said as I went to go and get it, but his thin, bony fingers gripped the top of my arm and pulled me back.

He spun me into him and grinned, forcing his lips against mine as I struggled and slammed my palms against his chest.

"Stop it," I said, shoving him so he stumbled back.

I turned on my heel, scooped up my phone, and started to stomp away from the bar and off down the country road. The street lamps along the way were mostly broken. Little piles of smashed glass were gathered around the bases of each one as if they had been shot at or taken out deliberately with

rocks. The darkness was like a blanket, wrapping itself around me and keeping me hidden. As I walked on, the nerves began to mount, but I refused to stay waiting next to that asshole. There was no way I was letting him put his dirty paws on me again. I'd walk until I saw the lights of the taxi and then I'd be out of there.

The road was long and the only light around was from the moon in the sky above. The stars were shining, but clouds were moving quickly and the wind began to pick up, rushing through the trees next to me on the lefthand side. I stopped and looked into them. They were so tall and dark. From inside I could hear the hoots of owls and the shriek of something in the undergrowth. Animals running, fighting, playing... whatever they were doing it made me shiver. I remembered the myths we heard when we were young, the cautionary tales told to keep us all in check. It had been years since I'd been back here to this town, but they still stood prominent in my memory, a stark reminder of my childhood and the past.

Don't ever go into the woods at night.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw him coming. He was staggering and waving his arm in the air, and I shook my head and turned back to look ahead. It was then I realized I hadn't even managed to put the order through on the app. I could either keep walking along this road and have him follow me, or I could ditch into the woods and try and hide.

The noises of animals still rang out, but after seeing how determined he could be, I'd take my chances with the mythical monsters and wild animals before I let him grab me again.

I faltered for a moment as I peered back up towards the road, seeing him stagger to the side as his eyes scanned the dark, furiously looking for me. Whatever was potentially hiding in those woods would be better than being mauled by him. I jumped down into the brush and made my way in. I slithered around the side of a tree and held my breath.

Out on the road, he had started calling the fake name I'd given him. My heart was pounding and my ears started to ring. I was going dizzy with nerves and the fear that at any moment he would realize where I was and come barging in.

When he came level, I held my breath again, not wanting to make a sound. He was at least twenty feet away, but I was starting to regret my decision to come amongst the trees. Something tickled my foot and I slammed my hand over my mouth to stop myself from screaming. I cast my eyes down to see a mouse, rustling through the fallen leaves, a small squeak escaping as it went.

His eyes flashed into the forest and I ducked, hoping he hadn't seen me. I prayed that the thickness of the trees had stopped him from catching me hiding there. But I could tell instantly that he knew, and I pushed myself back as I scrabbled through the undergrowth, staying as close to the ground as I could.

"Hey!" his voice pierced through the silence of the night. "What are you doing? Don't go in there!"

I crawled forwards before I lifted myself straight and started to run.

"Stop!" He called. "Come back!"

As I edged further into the blackness of the branches, my heart beat furiously in my chest. I still had my phone gripped tightly in my fingers, and I tried to tap the order button that I still hadn't managed to put through.

Suddenly the ground seemed to jump underneath me. I stopped and gasped, grabbing onto a tree and hiding behind it. I looked back towards the direction of the road to see if he was still following

me. My phone beeped, and I looked down to see I had no signal.

“Fuck,” I hissed.

“I mean it,” he called. “It’s dangerous in there, didn’t you get told the stories as a kid?” A laugh erupted from him and I watched as he hunched over, coughing as if he was about to throw up.

The ground jumped underneath me again and I grabbed hold of the tree.

“What the fuck is that...” I whispered.

It seemed that he had felt it too, and when I looked back to him he was standing straight again and looked confused.

BOOM.

The ground shook and I heard the snap of branches above my head. Another boom came and I heard movement. Something large was coming through the trees, snapping its way through in our direction and destroying whatever was in its path. I fought the urge to scream at the top of my lungs and darted out to the side, tripping over a tangled, knotted root and falling flat on my face. I pressed my hands into the soft earth and went to push myself up, but the booming had stopped and I could sense that something was near. I flicked my eyes up to look in the direction of the guy who had been following me, and the look on his face made my blood run cold.

His mouth was hanging open and his eyes were wide. Even with the darkness I could sense his fear. He staggered back, and then I felt it... something big, warm and rough grabbed my ankle and pulled me hard.

It pulled me back, dragging me further into the woods.



The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that my arms were numb. I felt strange. My neck ached and I realized I was hanging forward. My eyes were tightly closed but I forced them open, blinking to try to adjust to the small amount of light. I could see the tops of my legs and my knees. My thighs were streaked with mud, dampness, and caked-on leaves. A moan escaped my lips and I winced.

I wanted to speak but the words wouldn’t come. The numb ache of my arms was like a burn. It felt like they weren’t there but at the same time they were also heavy. I raised my head slowly, the ache in my neck almost stopping me from moving. When I managed to get it up straight and I looked around my vision was blurred but I could make out the lines of bars.

I was inside something.

A cage.

I blinked again and tried to focus, and my vision slowly returned to normal as reality came into full view.

The cage was made from strong tree branches, all twisted together and secured with twine. It must have been three meters wide and I was kneeling inside it, my hands tied at the wrists above me with

the rope looped through the bars above my head. I looked up and felt the panic shift through me.

I was trapped and bound.

I pulled my arms, the rope twisting hard around my wrists and making me gasp. My instinct was to scream but I was too confused and afraid. I held it in and struggled against the rough rope that held me in place. My eyes began to water and I kneeled up higher, stretching out my back one agonizing inch at a time. Somewhere around me, I could hear water, and I spun on the ropes, letting my knees twist so I turned around to see exactly where I was.

The first thing I noticed was the fact that I was underground in some kind of cave. The second was that there was a blue pool of freshwater about ten feet in front of me, reflecting what little light there was onto the rocks above. I could smell the earth and the scent of the trees. Everything felt damp, and all around the cave were large boulders and mounds of dirt. I saw a big clay bowl, what looked like a full, lumpy sack, and a pile of rags. I realized this wasn't just a cave... it was a den.

A home.

Something lived here.

The panic grew more intense and a cry escaped my lips. I never should have gone into the woods. I'd heard the stories as a child and stupidly thought I was too old to believe in the myths of monsters... now I had been taken, tied up, and was lost somewhere underground.

I sobbed and lowered my chin to my chest, straining against the bindings at my wrists, willing them to break.

I had to get out.

A noise broke through the echo of my cries and I stopped, barely daring to breathe. It was slow and heavy, it sounded like something was being pushed across the ground. The earth rumbled just like it had when I was out in the forest. I went deadly still, my eyes fixed on the other side of the cave which I was starting to realize had to be the entrance. A thud came, before the same sound echoed around the chamber, almost as if a door had been opened and then closed again.

My eyes were wide with fear, my heart was thumping in my chest, and as the sounds of heavy footsteps began to get closer I was frozen with terror.

Emerging from the darkness came a colossal beast. He lowered his head to stop it from hitting the top of the cave. He must have been almost eight feet tall, his shoulders were wide and his arms thick and veiny. His skin was tinged a grayish-green whilst his chest was muscular above the swell of his stomach. His thighs were wide and bulging against the fabric of his tattered trousers, which were held in place with a thick leather belt. I shifted backward and pressed myself against the cool wall of the cave, closing my eyes and staying still as if in some way this would make it impossible for him to see me.

Between the thick branch bars of my cage, I watched as he stomped closer, noticing how big his feet were. His calves were thick with a river of lumpy veins snaking their way down to his ankles. He was like a giant, his hands the size of shovels and his shoulders so broad they could eclipse the sun. He didn't look at me, but he came closer, gripping something in his fist as he reached down and picked up the sack and opened it wide.

I watched out of the corner of my eye with horror as I saw a collection of bones tumble out of the bag. Long bones... human bones. I made out a femur and what looked like a small section of ribs. I bit my lip closed and held in a scream. He pushed the fallen bones back into his sack and it was then I realized what he had in his hand.

A skull.

A human skull.

Fresh white and perfect, glistening as if it had just been licked clean.

I gasped, sucking in a breath and trying not to cry.

His eyes flicked up to me and I saw the darkness in them. He furrowed his brow and tossed the skull into the bag with a clink before he tied the top closed and dropped it back onto the ground.

He cocked his head to the side, looking at me as if he was amused. I looked away and tried to hide my face.

This. Could. Not. Be. Happening.

I heard and felt him coming. He took two big steps closer to me and I felt his hands on the side of the cage. He moved the branches slightly and I slipped, still trying to hide my face as if that would keep me out of sight, like a child playing hide and seek.

“Girl,” his voice came loud, like thunder. It rumbled through the cave and sent a wave of horror right through me.

I twisted in the ropes, my feet slipping underneath me as I tried to gain purchase and keep as close to the back of the cage as I could.

“GIRL,” he said again, this time louder. It made the branches of the cage vibrate and I turned my head to the side to look at him, too afraid to not do as I was told.

His eyes locked in on mine and I knew I must have looked like a deer caught in the headlights. I was staring back at him, eyes wide, my breathing fast and ragged as if I had just run a marathon. He kneeled on the floor of the cave, his hands gripping the branch bars and looking in at me intently.

He was so big and mighty, he was a true monster. An Ogre. He was hairless, and his neck was thick and muscular. Veins and muscles throbbed all over him, and his eyes were so dark and menacing they threatened with their very essence. I blinked and then swallowed nervously, and a wry smile spread across his lips. He shifted closer, bending open the branches of the cage with his huge hands before he reached inside and ran a big, thick finger from my shoulder down my side and to the top of my thigh.

I shuddered.

“You’re skinny,” he said. “Not much meat on those bones.”

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes and I whimpered.

“It’s a good job I’m satisfied,” he said. “Your friend was almost double your size.”

I cast my eyes across at him again and shook my head.

“Who?” I whispered. “What friend?”

“The man,” his voice boomed. “Out there in the trees with you. By the road.”

I shook my head again.

“He wasn’t my friend,” I told him.

“No?” His voice was loud but smooth, his big hand dug into the earth next to my feet as he dragged it back out to hold onto the bars.

“No, he was following me. I don’t know him.”

“He was going to hurt you,” he said with assurance as if he already knew it. “But he can’t now.”

I found myself looking down at the sack on the floor. The image of the skull he’d just tossed into it was still fresh in my mind.

“Was that him?” I asked nervously, motioning to the sack with my eyes.

He nodded.

I leaned back and let myself relax onto my heels.

He'd killed him, eaten him, and now he had me trussed up and kept in a cage.

This was not good.

"What are you?" I asked him.

He was still looking at me with a meanness that was unnerving, but there was something else there too. There was something in his eyes that surpassed hunger. Something carnal... a desire... a craving. He smiled and a big tongue flicked out of his mouth, wetting his bottom lip.

"You know what I am," he said. "Everyone in this town knows the stories."

"As a child, I heard there were monsters in these woods," I said.

"Well, what made you come here then?" He shouted, his expression turning immediately to anger.

The boom of his voice felt like a powerful wind rushing at me and I winced, sitting back and turning my head to the side.

I inhaled, trying to keep calm.

"I was trying to get away from him," I cried with panic. "I was running from him. I was afraid."

He cocked his head to the side again and studied me. He clearly found my terror amusing and was getting off on it. I could see a bulge stirring in his trousers. It was quickly straining up against his belt and it made me even more nervous. This brute of an ogre was toying with me.

He smiled and let go of the cage bars as he rose to his feet and began to walk away, his heavy footsteps making the ground shake as he went. I watched him as he passed by the underground pool and disappeared out of sight. I couldn't see him for a moment, but I heard him moving things before he reappeared with something in his hand. Something floaty and white. Fabric. It looked like a dress.

He put it down on the ground in front of the cage and then he bent down to glare at me again.

"I'll let you out if you don't cause any trouble," he said.

I shook my head and moved backward.

"I don't want to come out," I told him, my voice shaking.

He breathed heavily through his nose and gritted his teeth. I could see that they were sharp and long, with a yellow tinge that looked so strange against the greenish-gray of his skin. They made me shudder... perfect for tearing through thick chunks of flesh. Now I knew what happened to the people who went missing near these woods. They ended up here, tied up in a cage, being tormented by a hungry ogre before meeting their demise. But why was he looking at me in that naughty way? And why was he offering to let me out?

"You need to bathe," he said, gesturing to the streaks of mud all over my clothes. "I'll untie you, but I won't have you screaming."

His gaze fixed firmly on me, waiting for me to agree.

This was strange... was he being... *nice*?

I nodded my head and waited for him to untie the twine keeping the branches of the cage fastened shut. He lifted part of the structure away and then there was nothing between us. He bent in towards me, his bulky frame blocking out the light reflecting on the pool behind him. As his enormous hands came closer to me I saw how thick his fingers were. They were as wide as rolling pins. They reached up to the tightly bound rope at my wrists and worked at untying them, before those hands both came and clamped me around the waist, pulling me forward and out. My arms felt weightless and numb, and they flopped uselessly at my side. The ogre rose to his feet, taking me with him, holding me

against his chest. He lifted me and studied me, turning his head from side to side as he took in the features of my face. His hands were heavy but they didn't hurt, they held me effortlessly and as the feeling started to come back to my arms, I found myself taking hold of his wrists to help steady myself in his grip. His skin was smooth and warm, not at all what I had been expecting. We were in a cold, damp cave and I had expected him to feel the same. But the heat coming from within him was intense and it felt good to be warmed by him.

He placed me down on the floor and looked over me. At five foot five, I only came up to his waist and was certainly no match for him, I was going to have to do whatever he said. He was so tall, and the bulk of his muscles and heft was more intimidating than the idea of what he could potentially do to me if he found himself hungry again. He could flatten me with one swing of his arm. He could probably tear my head off if he wanted. I swallowed nervously and tried to smile, looking up into his eyes, begging in my own way for mercy.

His eyes seemed to turn black, his pupils engulfing them. And then he smiled at me too, a small smile, but gentle. Not a teeth-baring intimidating smile, but one that seemed to be laced with affection. He reached down and his thick fingers lifted my top up and over my head. The cool air of the cave hit me and made my nipples harden and a grunt escaped his lips as he looked at my breasts. He reached, sliding his palm over them, completely cupping the swell and groaning as he felt how full they were. I gasped as a tingle ran through me and a rush of excitement grew between my legs. Next, he went for my jeans. But instead of being gentle he grabbed them on either side, ripped them in half, and then clean-off in one swift pull. A little whine of fright escaped my lips as I stood there in only my panties, looking up at him with doe eyes. He glowered down at me. His breath hitched as he traced a big finger over the side of my underwear and then he ripped them away too, leaving me completely exposed. I didn't move, I stood as still as I could without shaking.

My jeans lay in shreds on the floor, and he reached forward, picking me up in his warm grip as he began to walk with me towards the azure blue of the rock pool. He dropped me in gently with a splash, and the cold water hit, making me gasp. I looked up at him as he began to unbuckle the thick belt at his waist, before pulling down the tattered trousers. I looked away, nervous about what I might see. If his fingers were that thick, then I couldn't even imagine how enormous his length must be. I heard him grunt as the trousers slapped against the wet rocks and curiosity got the better of me as I snuck a glimpse at him out of the corner of my eye.

I never could have been prepared for what I saw. Hanging there, thick and meaty between his legs, was the girthiest, greenest, veiniest cock. It was like nothing I had ever seen or imagined, and I found myself turning to stare at him head-on, my mouth gaping open with both shock and awe.

He saw me looking as he stepped into the rock pool, his thighs tensing as he submerged into the water in front of me. I found myself stepping back a little, my heart racing in my chest and my body trembling. It was cold, but just by being in the water he seemed to be warming it up with his gargantuan body. He was formidable, and he held out his hand, motioning with his head for me to take hold of it. I was so confused. He was absolutely terrifying, but I was being drawn to him in the most unexpected way. I reached out to let my hand slip into his and he clamped his massive fist around mine before pulling me forward, straight through the water, and up into his lap. I slapped up against his chest, my breasts flattening against his torso, and I felt how sculpted he was. He wasn't at all how I would have expected an ogre to be from the way they were portrayed in fairytales. This ogre was like a tank. The heat from him spread through me and I stopped shivering. I put my hands on his chest,

laying them flat, and I could feel the thump of his heart. It was getting faster as his breathing became more intense. I looked into his eyes and they were fully engulfed in black, I could see myself reflected in them.

“You’re different to the human girls I’ve had the pleasure of in the past,” he said.

I faltered for a moment, not sure of whether I should ask him how.

“You smell different... not like a meal... You smell like a mate.”

I blinked, my mouth forming into an O.

“A, a mate?” I stammered.

He pulled me closer to him and put his nose against my neck, sniffing in deeply and slowly. He moved his head, breathing me in, inhaling the scent of my skin, as he gripped me tight at the waist. I felt something happening between my legs, and I realized he was getting hard. His cock was rising in the water, between my buttocks, parting them slightly as the tip broke the surface. I felt it against the small of my back and I gulped.

Oh my GOD.

I looked over my shoulder to see the huge head bobbing up, it was the same green as the rest of him, with a big slit across the top that was already leaking seed.

I bit my bottom lip and turned back to him, and he looked at me through hooded eyes. A shiver rolled through me but it wasn’t from nerves, it was from excitement. This ogre was hard for me. He was gripping me with his big, smooth hands, and I was getting turned on too. A flutter thrummed through me, right to my pussy and I knew I was getting slick with desire. He reached up and rubbed water across my shoulders, cleaning the streaks of mud away as he massaged me with his heavy hands. I closed my eyes. It felt incredible and my head rolled back as I exhaled. My nipples hardened as he moved down to them, rubbing the dirt away and pinching them lightly.

He sniffed my neck again, pressing his nose into the artery throbbing on my throat, and then he moved to my cheek. He breathed in, inhaling my feminine scent deeply into his lungs. I trembled in his arms as he lifted me high as he stood himself and stepped out of the rock pool with one large stride. He turned me in his arms so he was carrying me on my back, one arm underneath me and one reaching for the crumbled white dress on the floor. He lay it on top of me and then he began to walk away from the pool, deeper into the cave, and off into the darkness.

I held my breath as we descended into another part of the cave I hadn’t even realized was there. Inside there were candles lit in alcoves, and I saw a large table sat in the middle of the room that had to be at least five feet high. There were shackles in the middle through metal loops, perfect for locking someone in place. The legs of it were made from felled tree trunks, and there was one large chair placed at the very end. He walked with me towards it and I felt myself stiffen.

“What... what is this room?” I asked with panic.

He cast his eyes down to me and smiled.

“My dining chamber,” he said with a grunt.

I tried to twist in his arms, fear shifting through my entire body, which only heightened the tingling sensation between my thighs. He laid me down and held me in place, snapping the shackles around my wrists before he pulled me down on the table so half of my legs dangled off the end. He lifted them onto the edge, bending them at the knees and his huge hands gripped onto my ankles.

“Please,” I panted. “I thought you said I didn’t smell like a meal...”

A wry smile spread across his lips and he shook his head.

He held my ankles open, pulling my legs apart as he stared deep inside me, studying me like I was precious. His eyes darkened and his hefty tongue flicked out and licked his bottom lip.

“Well don’t you look good enough to eat,” he snarled.

His cock was still hard and leaking, resting on the edge of the table right by me. I still couldn’t take my eyes away from it. It was just so *big*. So veiny and green, with bumps running along the underside like a ridge. I wanted to touch it and feel its heat.

He lifted my ankle and sniffed the bone, his big tongue lolling out as he traced it higher and heavily up my shin to my knee. His tongue was hot and slithery, drool pooled at the corner of his mouth as he tasted me and I saw his cock jump with excitement.

I held my breath as he moved from my knee up my thigh. The thrill was growing as he got higher and higher, my heart racing and my head spinning. He stopped when he reached my pussy and he groaned as he pushed his face into it... into me. I felt his nose enter me and I froze, he sniffed again, sucking me deep into his lungs, but it felt incredible and I whimpered with pleasure.

He moaned and the vibration from his throat reverberated right through me. I bucked my hips up to grind my cunt against his face. I didn’t understand what was happening, the fear was intense, but I couldn’t try to stop him. I wanted it to happen, even if it terrified me. He smiled as he moved back and I saw his face was glistening wet with my arousal. My body was betraying me, he knew he had me.

“Girl,” he said with his thunderous voice. “Spread your legs wider so I don’t have to hold you down.”

He let go of my ankles and I nervously parted my legs again, resting my feet on either side of the table. He pulled the chair forward and sat down in it, so I was laid out in front of him like a delectable dish. His black, hooded eyes flickered with want as he licked his lips, groaning as he bent down and finally, dragged his huge, hot, slippery tongue right up the full length of my slit.

The heat rushed through me like a wave. It rolled from my core right up my tummy, across my chest, and to my cheeks. I gasped as I struggled in the shackles and dug my fingernails into the tabletop. Dragging them down the wood to leave deep scratch marks. He moaned as he moved back down to do it again, and I was already seeing stars. He feasted on me, his tongue dipping inside before moving up to find my jewel. He was so big, the pressure from it had me crying out as he gripped hold of my thighs and nuzzled his face as far into me as he could go.

He pulled back a little and groaned, his chin was dripping wet, and I felt a blush creep up my neck.

“You like that,” he said in his thunderous voice. “I like it too.”

His cock jerked in front of him and he reached down with his huge hand and wrapped his fist around it. With his other hand, he kept hold of my thigh, and I watched with wide eyes as he started to pump his fist up and down, looking at my pussy and licking his lips. The slit at the top of his cock was oozing, and he grunted with each stroke.

“I like the taste of you Girl,” he murmured. “But it’s my cock that wants to be buried in you.”

I strained against the shackles and shook my head.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” I told him, even though I was already looking at it and wishing that it were.

If he tried to enter me with that thing, I had the feeling he would split me in half.

He smiled and cocked his head to the side, rising to his feet and moving forward so his huge, beefy

length was right between my legs. He held the tip against me and rubbed it up and down, tracing the path his tongue had made only moments before. I shuddered, my eyes rolling back into my head. He was so sleek with his arousal that as it mixed with mine and he rubbed the head over my nub I was already on the verge of unraveling beneath him. He withdrew and stood back, looking down at me, whilst his hand kept working himself over, his other let go of my thigh and moved between my legs. I held my breath as he pressed his thick index finger against my hole, edging it in slowly, and grunting with approval as it made its way inside.

“It is soft and warm in there, Girl,” he said, gripping his cock harder.

The pressure of his finger and the heat of him were making my legs shake. I could barely breathe, I flattened myself back against the table and moved my hips, sliding myself up and down his finger as I dug my heels into the wood. He smiled, watching me fuck his hand, as he stretched me wider by shoving his middle finger in too. It burned but only for a moment. He moved his hand up and down, stretching my walls to their limit with his thick, bulky digits.

He let go of his cock and it bobbed in front of him, and I leaned up, desperate to touch it. He pushed in another finger, all three of his middle ones stretching me so wide my eyes watered.

“You give yourself away, Girl,” he bellowed. “There’s plenty more for you, don’t fret.”

I blinked and lay back down, unsure of why I was being so easily swayed by this big, ugly beast. But he was just so attentive, and he did everything so well. I smiled and relaxed, welcoming the idea of him doing that to me again. It had been a while since a man had paid attention to my body, and to have him so eager to please was welcomed.

He withdrew his hand from my cunt and I felt stretched wide open. He towered over me and eclipsed my body with his as he undid the chains at my wrists. He bared his big, yellowy teeth and when I saw how sharp they were it sent a rush right through me.

“You knew never to come into these woods... But now you’re here, you need to be punished.”

I cowered a little, trying to move back, but he shook his head and pressed me down with one hand, whilst with the other he fumbled between my legs, grabbing hold of his cock and pushing it against me.

“Your hole will take it,” he grunted.

The width of it was so large, it felt as if he were trying to push me up the table. I gasped and grabbed his shoulder, trying to think of the right way to discourage him without making him angry.

“I don’t think it will,” I said through gritted teeth. “I want it to, but it’s just... so big.”

“It will,” he said with a groan. “It will work.”

He dipped his huge finger inside me again and used some of my slick to rub on himself before he moved forward and pushed hard. The feeling of being stretched by him was like a burn and my eyes began to water. I closed my eyes as he pushed his full weight on me, stretching me wider than I ever thought I wanted. But the burn was so good. I cried as he forced it, and once the head of him popped inside, half of him followed. I gasped whilst he nestled there and the ridges on the underside locked him in place.

I stared up at him, terrified to move. But even more afraid of him moving. I wanted to ask him to be gentle, but I was so full of him I couldn’t form the words. He pulled his hips back before he very slowly pushed into me again. I cried out. The pain was intense, but it was quickly being replaced by something else. Something so engulfing and satisfying that I was dizzy with bliss.

“Your hole is so tight Girl, it is making me ooze,” he grunted. “Have you ever taken an ogre’s load

before?”

I shook my head.

I most certainly had not.

A wry smile spread across his lips as he shoved into me again, then again, slowly and with an agonizing force that made my whole body tremble with need. He reached up and flicked my nipples, teasing them between his rough fingers as his eyes locked with mine.

This ogre was claiming me. He had decided something when he found me in the forest, and now I was beginning to understand that even if I had resisted, it only would have ended this way. With him being sunk in me to the root, whilst his swollen green balls smacked up against the side of his feasting table. If ogres were all about consuming their prey, then he was doing exactly that. He had tasted and marked every single inch of me, and now I wasn't going to be able to walk away from him without a fight.

The pleasure flowed through me as he pushed into me again. The ridges on the underside of his cock were rolling across my perineum and I could feel them popping in and out, one by one.

He grunted and I saw his eyes darken even more as he gripped onto my hips and raised me off the table, pulling me towards him so he had hold of me like a toy. He bobbed me up and down, sliding me along the full length of him, and his moans and groans became quicker and heavier as the heat grew within me too. It didn't hurt any longer, it felt incredible. And with each fevered push he hit new depths inside me that sent me spiraling into a furious peak. I screamed as I locked my legs around him, and he grunted and thrust as his huge member started to pulse.

He pulled me off him and threw me back onto the table as he took hold of his cock and milked it with a roar until his knees trembled and a huge spray of thick, hot, white cum shot out of his slit and covered me from the pussy all the way up to my neck.

I gasped and looked up at him, my eyes wide with shock. But the ogre was too busy smiling, letting the last spurts of his spunk drip onto the floor at his feet.

My breathing was ragged and my heart was pounding. My pussy was stretched and sore, but I felt so completely satisfied that my body was like a pool of warm jelly.

“That was good, Girl,” he said as he passed me a bundle of rags to wipe myself clean. “I think I'll keep you.”

As I sat up on the edge of the table, his creamy load still dripping off the ends of my feet, he passed me the white fabric that he'd collected whilst we'd been back in the other part of the cave.

“Put this on,” he ordered.

I unfolded it and saw that it was a dress. White and lacy, thin and ripped.

I slipped my arms into it and pulled it over my head, it sticking to my body with the aftermath.

“You're my pet,” he said, his voice rumbling through the cave. “I'll look after you and in return, you will please me each night when I return to this cave.”

I looked at him, as his throbbing cock slowly pulsed itself hard again. I looked at the cages he had lined up along the walls, and the remnants of bones that were lying all around this place. Whether they were in bags or just on the countertops, it was clear he had a lot of people over for dinner.

But he liked me... He wanted to keep me.

And who was I to argue with that?

My mind flitted to the guy from the bar. There were so many men like him, all monsters in their own way.

At least in here, I was safe... I'd be taken care of, adored, and worshipped. And I would get to ride that incredible piece of equipment every night... there were much worse predicaments to be stuck in. My ogre was nowhere near as much of a monster as half of the men out there. And he certainly had plenty of *extra* qualities too.

I shrugged.

"Okay," I said. "But I have one thing to say..."

I leaned back on the table, hitching the dress up around my waist, parting my legs, and smiling.

He turned to look at me, his eyes darkening again with amusement.

"I don't think you tasted me enough the first time," I grinned.

I'd known never to come into these woods at night...

And now it looked like I would never leave.

THE END

Thanks for reading *The Ogre's Pet*. Want to read more? Check out my website:
www.kassandracroos.com

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Black Magic: The Witches of Valport Springs Book One

Carrie's First Time

Carrie's First Party

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Carrie's First Ride

Three Bad Bosses

Learning The Hard Way

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kassandra is a writer of all things romantic, paranormal, dark, and forbidden. When she isn't drinking wine, lusting over shoes and handbags, reading tarot cards, or dabbling with magic, you can find her exploring her dark side through writing, creating powerful alpha males and lovable heroines. All of her books are, in some way, about love... whether it be red hot, bed shaking love... unrequited love... first love... forbidden love... taboo love... magical love... or just plain pure love... Kassandra LOVES writing about our most important and soul-shaping relationships! She loves connecting with her readers, so please get in touch via any of her social media links. And don't forget to join her reader group [Kassandra's Bad Girls of Romance](#) on Facebook.

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Once upon a time there lived a lamb as pure as snow
Sold by family, shepherd-raised, he'd had no place to go
The night he reached maturity, the lamb was sold once more
By the highest bidder, claimed and owned, brought to the palace floor
Offered up, a princely gift, but to the lamb's dismay -
The present of his presence shunned, the lamb was turned away.
By the wolf, his royal highness, no welcome was there given;
Yet thawed by something secret, and by longing instincts driven -
The feast of senses offered may yet turn him to a glutton;
And by fang and claw, and lustful awe,
...he may yet crave some mutton.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is an omegaverse story inspired by Little Red Riding Hood.

In this world, omegas are called Lambs and alphas are called Wolves. Lambs are typically discovered at birth because they are intersex (meaning they contain both outward physical manifestations of genitalia). Lambs are highly sought after and many are sold to Farms to be raised in flocks by Shepherds (one version of a beta in this world) so they can learn how to be the “perfect” version of submissive Lambs. Lambs also experience heats, in which they produce strong pheromones to entice Wolves to rut and breed them. They’re able to produce slick from both their vaginal and anal orifices. Lambs are unable to impregnate other Lambs as they do not have sperm. They are treated as fancy livestock, and you will frequently see skin referred to as “coat” and hair referred to as “fur.” Wolves mature into their dominant nature, and powerful Wolves are capable of shifting into another form. Most Wolves are in positions of power. When aroused, they form a knot in order to keep their sperm locked inside the Lamb to optimize breeding.

This is a rather...different take on omegaverse, but I hope you give it a chance.

CHAPTER ONE

Sigourney held in a sneeze as a piece of straw tickled his nose.

He stoically endured the tickling, lest he give away his hiding spot among the freshly laid bedding. The horse in the stall, an older gelding, stared at the interloper with curiosity; however, it was more interested in masticating the fresh-smelling alfalfa hay rather than worrying about causing a ruckus, for which Sigourney was grateful.

Pressing closer to the loose wooden slats of the stall, the Lamb squinted his eyes as he took in the couple he was spying on. An afternoon pursuit he was quickly regretting as the entire endeavor of intercourse looked a lot more unpleasant than Sigourney had been led to believe.

His nose wrinkled in distaste as the cook grunted and sweated, working himself hip-deep into the silent stable boy, who appeared as though he endured the undertaking out of pure spite. Sigourney bitterly wondered if the Shepherds even knew what they were talking about when they instructed their little Lambs about copulation.

Growing up on the Farm like he had, Sigourney had been intimately taught about the physicality and pleasures of intercourse from a textbook without experiencing it firsthand. Their professors and caretakers, the Shepherds, frequently proclaimed about reaching a pinnacle; falling over a great precipice that would leave both the Lamb—like Sigourney—and their master—Wolf—heavily satisfied when the time came.

Copulation and breeding were the ultimate purposes of a Lamb, after all.

But as he watched the cook pull from the sour-mouthed stable boy, buttoning up his pants one-handed, before tossing a copper penny at the feet of his partner and hobbling off, Sigourney dreaded his upcoming auction now that he was of age.

Every Lamb, after being sold to the Farm and reaching their age of maturity, would be auctioned off to the highest bidder to help bring wealth to the township. A portion of his sale would also be sent back to his parents. The higher the selling bid, the higher in status the parents of the Lamb rose.

At his birth, his mother's midwife knew immediately that he was a Lamb as he bore both a functional penis and vagina.

His parents, recently having hit a phase of financial hardship, were even more pleased by his unique coloring—they hoped it would fetch them a handsome price.

Sigourney was born with moon-pale skin and hair that matched. As he aged, his hair darkened to the color of honey sweet mead while his coat maintained its hue of milk. Sigourney's eyes, blue as cornflowers and surrounded by silvery lashes, were stark and bold on his otherwise pale face. They carried the full weight of his curiosity for the realm in which he had been borne unto and the people in it.

While Lambs came in a variety of colors, the most highly sought after came in solid colors.

Coats as pale as an ermine moth with fur to match, or as dark and lush as freshly turned soil. Sigourney's closest friend at the Farm, Harou, had skin the hue of burnt umber with a tumble of curly locks the shade of a pecan. With eyes the color of coal and lashes as long as a fawn's, Harou was stunning.

As if summoned by thoughts alone, Sigourney heard Harou's lilting voice outside, summoning the stable boy away from the horses so Sigourney could escape from the stall unnoticed. Accepting the opportunity, he stood, wiping straw and hay from his linen pants and shirt as he did. After giving the

horse a good pat, he slipped from the stall, latching it behind him before creeping out of the opposite end of the barn from where his friend had distracted the barn worker. There, he waited for Harou to approach him once the coast was clear.

While waiting, he diligently worked the pieces of straw from his long mane.

It was more difficult than he had imagined it would be and required a delicate touch. Slowly, gently, he grasped a tumble of straw and weaved it through the fine strands of his hair, being careful not to rip the ends. As he engaged in the fruitless task, he let his mind wander.

In mere days, his auction would commence. He would be flaunted before the wealthiest Wolves in Merrimack, and his freedom—as fleeting as it was at the Farm—would be stolen from him. Everything he knew would change. Even with curiosity of the world outside the Farm nagging him, Sigourney was scared to leave the only home he had ever known.

Scared to leave Harou, his best friend and companion. Worried who would care for and protect Harou in his absence. Though beautiful, Harou bore the hateful scars of his jilted sibling who was born beta rather than as a Lamb. As a result, Harou's left eye was missing, and as the pair of friends had discovered early in their childhood, the glaring difference made Harou an easy target for bullying from Lambs that had yet to be purchased, or even from Shepherds with foul tempers.

So lost in thought, Sigourney hadn't noticed when Harou snuck up on him and nearly came out of his skin when his best friend whispered, "Boo!" directly in his ear.

With a yelp, Sigourney whipped around, hand to his heart. When he saw his friend's laughing face, his features pinched into a scowl.

"Harou!" Sigourney scolded, more embarrassed than angry. But even as he attempted to keep the frown on his countenance, he felt it melting away in the face of Harou's soft laughter. Seeing the shy Lamb laugh was such an uncommon occurrence that Sigourney couldn't hold on to the annoyance.

Huffing out a breath, Sigourney smiled at the dark-haired Lamb as he held out a hand. His long sleeve draped over his fingertips as he wiggled them in invitation. "Come on, let's go eat."

The pair headed indoors, hand in hand, Sigourney's looming auction far in the back of his mind.

CHAPTER TWO

Birdsong lulled Sigourney from sleep a long while before the morning bell sounded throughout the stables housing the Lambs.

He sat, curled in his bed, clutching the down feather blanket around his shoulders. The lush pastures beyond his windows were almost blindingly green with their fresh growth, the newness a stark contrast to the weathered fence surrounding the fields. For almost twenty years, this was the view that greeted Sigourney every morning upon his waking.

What view awaited him from his future partner's bedroom window?

Powerful Wolves traveled from across Merrimack to attend the auctions. Today, his window graced him with fields. Tomorrow, potentially a beach shore.

Which, Sigourney figured, wouldn't be *too* bad.

He was just apprehensive of the unknown.

Heaving a heavy sigh, he flung himself backward on bed, steadfastly ignoring the second ringing of the morning bell.

Sigourney was still sprawled, upside down, on his bed when a tentative knock sounded on his door.

"Come in," he mumbled, voice muffled by the sheets draped over his head. He heard Harou offer out a quiet greeting before near-silent footsteps made their way to his bed. Then, silence.

Sigourney waited to see what his shy friend would do, a smile growing on his lips.

Suddenly, the sheet was ripped off his frame, exposing his bare legs to the cool air. He squawked, indignant, but Harou just chuckled at him as he quickly and efficiently folded the blanket before setting it aside.

"You've nearly missed breakfast," Harou said as he took a seat beside Sigourney's head on the bed. The mattress dipped under his weight and Sigourney rolled into the dip, tucking his face between the bed and Harou's thigh.

"Ughh," was all Sigourney said in reply. He knew he was acting like a brat, but he didn't want to leave the comforting cocoon of his room.

If he did, then he had to face the reality that tonight was the auction.

Tonight was his last night at the Farm; his last night with Harou.

"It's all your favorites," his friend encouraged gently. "Fried eggs, fresh tomatoes, sausages, and bacon...and the Shepherds picked up fresh bread from the bakery, just this morning."

A hand stroked down Sigourney hair and he burrowed himself deeper, inhaling the enticing scent of Harou's yuzu body oil. That light citrus smell would always remind Sigourney of his friend.

"Cinnamon apples?" Sigourney sniffed. He wouldn't deign to leave his room unless the syrupy, cinnamon-and-sugar-coated apple slices were available.

"Yes, even those." He could hear the smile in Harou's voice. Deft fingers stroked the hair away from his face, and Sigourney turned his head slightly, just enough that an impossibly blue eye peeked out.

"I'm scared," the blond whispered, fear in his tone.

"I know you are," Harou replied, still gently running fingers through the pale locks. "And that's okay. But think of it this way—you'll be going on your greatest adventure yet. You've wanted to see more of Merrimack, and now you have the chance."

“But what if he’s cruel?” There were a number of Wolves that were well-known for their cruel treatment of Lambs. They collected Lambs like prizes, and frequently rented them out to the military’s Bloodhounds for amusement and profit.

While Lambs were highly sought after, they were plentiful enough that there were no regulations for those who purchased them. Even Wolves with nasty reputations were allowed to continuously bid. And that, more than anything, was Sigourney’s biggest fear.

The Farm held seasonal dinners where Wolves could come and meet the Lambs that would be available at the next auction. During the previous dinner they’d held, Conri, the Wolf general of the Bloodhounds, had shown a deep interest in Sigourney.

Conri had a nasty reputation.

While not necessarily cruel, he saw his Lambs as livestock and treated them as such. Rarely did he keep a Lamb for himself. Rather, he purchased one at an auction and then resold the Lamb during his own private auctions of betas, who were not allowed to participate in Farm auctions.

Sigourney had a deep, sinking feeling that Conri would place a bid on him. He could only hope that someone else outbid the infamous Wolf.

“Then you run,” came Harou’s reply, which startled Sigourney out of his thoughts.

“What?” He was shocked. Lambs *never* fought back against their owners. Obedience was trained into them from birth.

But Harou was adamant. With his hands, he tugged Sigourney into a sitting position. Their eyes met and held.

“You deserve more than cruelty. *Everyone* deserves more than that. If your owner is cruel, or even if you’re simply unhappy, Sig, you *run*. ”

Run away?

Could he really do it?

Sigourney wasn’t sure and he hoped he never had to find out.

CHAPTER THREE

Later that evening, Sigourney discovered that he would, in fact, run when his future was on the line.

Just as he feared, Conri snatched Sigourney up at the auction, outbidding the other three Wolves interested in him.

Before he knew it, he was whisked off to Conri's awaiting carriage without even being able to say goodbye to Harou. He had spotted Harou's teary-eyed, mournful face in the crowd as he was ushered out. Swore he read lips that mouthed, "Run."

So he did.

When the carriage was forced to stop due to a fallen limb in the road, Sigourney lunged for the carriage door and flung it open, heaving his slim body outside and tearing off through the night-dark woods without a clue as to where he was headed.

Conri had yelled after him, and Sigourney scrambled to get better on the slick, damp earth when he heard his would-be owner shouting for the Sheepdogs traveling with him.

Sheepdogs were special. They were Epsilons, a fusion of Wolf genetics specialized in labs and customized to be hunters and caretakers. Specifically for Lambs. Sheepdogs were the ones sent to gather Lambs from villages as toddlers and tasked with delivering them to Farms. To Sigourney's knowledge, they had never had to actually hunt down a rogue Lamb.

Until now.

He sincerely hoped that the Sheepdogs Conri had in his employ slid more on the caretaker side than the hunter.

Sigourney wasn't sure how long he had been running now, but his bare feet were sore and aching. He had not been given an opportunity to change prior to being taken away, so all he wore was his auction garments. A thin, satin robe the color of the full moon and delicate, lacy lingerie to match. A simple corset lacking boning was tight around his ribs as he panted for air.

The night grew darker the deeper into the woods he ran.

Howls lit the evening air as the creatures of night stirred. He heard several animals take off into the underbrush as he tore past, and he was grateful he had yet to run into anything dangerous.

In his home village, they only had snakes with venomous fangs to worry about but the Shepherds kept the Lambs so isolated at the Farm that Sigourney wasn't even sure which part of Merrimack he was currently located. What animals hid in the shadows?

His energy waned as the adrenaline he'd been running on began to fade from his system.

One step further, he began whispering to himself silently with each step. *Just one more.*

He could no longer hear the Sheepdogs behind him, but Sigourney knew they wouldn't stop their search so easily. Not when Conri had spent so much gold on him.

The powerful general would undoubtedly want a return on his investment, and he would not let his newly prized possession go without a fight.

A stone, hardly larger than his palm, turned out to be his undoing in the end.

It cut into the sole of one of his sore, blistered feet and the pain made him stumble, sending

Sigourney to his knees.

The Lamb knelt there, long fingers digging into the damp earth, as his body shook and shuddered from overuse and the fear coursing through his body. His ribs, clenched tightly behind the corset, ached with every inhale. Sigourney's throat was raw from his panting breaths. Every time he swallowed, it felt like needles were scraping his esophagus.

Exhaustion crept in quickly once he stopped moving.

After a long battle where Sigourney begged his body to get up, *just get up*, his muscles finally gave out and he fell, face first, into the forest floor.

A whisper in the brush to his right made Sigourney blink open his tired eyes. There, standing right before him, was a dark, furred figure with gleaming, golden eyes.

It was difficult for Sigourney to see much of the creature when its fur blended so deeply into the shadows, but the glistening white teeth stood out sharply in the gloom.

“What big teeth...” Sigourney whispered, before darkness swallowed him whole.

CHAPTER FOUR

The bird song that lulled Sigourney from sleep was reminiscent of what he heard at the Farm. For a sweetly blissful moment, he thought it all had been a dream.

But when he opened his eyes, he saw an unfamiliar ceiling. Terror coursed throughout his body as he worried that Conri had caught up with him. Before he could work himself up too much, a voice spoke from his right, causing Sigourney to whip his head around.

“Peace, little lamb. You’re safe here.”

The voice was deep and growling, nearly intimidating, but the underlying honeyed sweetness to the tone gave Sigourney pause.

He had never heard a Wolf with such a gentle voice.

And the person sitting beside him was, without a doubt, a Wolf.

Soil dark hair sat atop the man’s head, curling around his ears and falling across his forehead in a careless array. Matching eyes, with hints of burnished gold, gazed back at Sigourney as he took the Wolf in. A lean nose led down to plush lips with a defined Cupid’s bow. His bottom lip was larger than his upper lip, giving him a permanent pout. A sharply cut jaw with a day’s worth of stubble rounded out his face.

The stranger’s body was rangy and long, with darkly tanned skin. He had thick, muscular thighs that were currently spread wide to accommodate what appeared to be an impressive bulge in his tight leather pants.

Sigourney felt heat rise to his cheeks and he immediately glanced away. He had never, in all nineteen years of his life, been attracted to someone before. But the way this Wolf was sprawled in the simple wooden chair, seemingly taking up more space in the atmosphere of the cabin than his body should, had Sigourney drawn to him.

It was more than just his attractive features.

This Wolf had an overwhelming presence, one that made Sigourney want to roll over on his belly and present himself for the taking.

He had never experienced this type of draw. Without realizing it, the Lamb found himself swaying forward, leaning nearer to the Wolf.

While Sigourney had been eyeing the Wolf, the other man had, in turn, been taking in the Lamb.

“Your smell,” the Wolf rumbled, large fist clenching on his thigh. Sigourney had unwittingly leaned so far off the bed that his waist-length hair had been dragging over the Wolf’s thighs.

Startled, Sigourney jerked back. Did he stink from running in the woods all night? Mortified, he began gathering the long, honey-colored strands of his hair into a bun, pulling the tail end through a loop in order to keep it situated at the top of his head.

The quilt covering his legs was embroidered with symbols, and he traced his fingertips over the fine seams aimlessly to avoid looking up.

Sigourney sighed heavily, then paused. He had grown accustomed to wearing corsets during the day, to help assist him in getting a curvier waist under clothes, per the Shepherds’ instructions, and when he had passed out, he had been wearing his corset. Now, however, he simply wore the lacy undergarment.

His robe, he suddenly realized, was also missing.

As he finally paused a moment and took stock of his body, he realized the Wolf had taken care of

him. He flexed and pointed his toes, feeling bandages tighten and release against the movements. The Wolf had apparently removed Sigourney's most restrictive clothing but allowed him the dignity of keeping his undergarments in place rather than changing the Lamb himself.

"Thank you," Sigourney whispered, suddenly shy. "And I'm sorry, for disrupting your peace. And...for smelling." Heat swelled in the Lamb's face once more as he recalled how the Wolf had said he smelled.

But then the Wolf replied in a grumble, "You smell delicious. Like cinnamon sugar. So sweet I could swallow you whole."

Sigourney's flush deepened even as he felt wetness beneath his lap. He adjusted his position, attempting to move off the spot, but he felt more trickling. With a start, he realized it was his slick.

Other Lambs had leaked slick at the Farm, aroused by the scents of visiting Wolves, but Sigourney had never experienced it. Had thought himself broken for not being easy to harden, or quick to slick up.

He knew, without a doubt, that was not the case now. He had just never had the opportunity to meet a Wolf that spoke to him on a raw, innate level.

Sigourney refused to waste this opportunity.

So when the rumble, delicious-looking Wolf growled, "Come here," Sigourney went without hesitation.

The Lamb crawled into the Wolf's lap, straddling those trim hips and sitting atop the muscular thighs. With haste, the Wolf clutched at Sigourney's sides.

His hands were so large they nearly encircled his whole waist. Sigourney shivered in the Wolf's arms, feeling delicate and tiny and wanting to be fucked until that delicate shell broke.

"What's your name?" the Wolf asked, reaching up to run a finger along the strap of Sigourney's lingerie. It had thin straps, the lacy top starting right below the Lamb's nipples. They were rose pink and hardened into stiff peaks under the watchful, hot gaze of the Wolf.

"Sigourney," he replied, squeezing his thighs tighter around the other man's waist. He couldn't stop moving, soaking up textures and warmth from the Alpha before him. Smooth leather, soft cotton, calloused palms, and rough stubble. It was all in sharp contrast to the satiny skin gracing Sigourney's figure, and he couldn't wait to have those hands skimming over his bare body. Wetness leaked from him at the mere thought.

"I'm Marrok, little lamb. And for tonight, you'll be mine."

CHAPTER FIVE

A keen worked its way out of Sigourney's mouth just as a gush of slick worked its way out of both of his holes.

"You're so wet, I can smell it," the Wolf snarled. Both of his hands dove down, clutching at Sigourney's rump. The large palms spread each cheek apart, holding them wide open. Marrok jiggled Sigourney's ass in his hands, and with each thump of his ass down against the Wolf's thighs, slick dripped through the soaked lingerie and splattered onto the floor.

"*Fuck*, you're soaked," he groaned, running the pad of a finger against the lace-covered whorl of Sigourney's hole. "I'm going to split my time between tasting and fucking both of your holes, little lamb. Bend you right over this bed and split you in half over my cock, watch your tight hole struggle around my knot."

Sigourney moaned at the thought, rutting his small, hard erection against Marrok's stomach. "Please," he begged. "Please, please."

"Hush, sweet. I'll take care of you," Marrok assured Sigourney as he stood up, holding the Lamb steady as he walked the few steps from the chair to his bed, and lowered the smaller man to the bed.

With steady hands, Marrok stripped Sigourney of his clothes and his dignity. The Lamb was a writhing, whiny mess of arousal, soaking the sheets beneath him in rapid time. Sigourney's prick was small but girthy, and it pulsed with his arousal, jerking and pumping out precum every time Marrok's rough palms ran over his flanks.

"Look at you," the Wolf cooed, sliding his hand up Sigourney's super sensitive dick. "So reactive. Have you never been touched before?"

Sigourney was sprawled on the bed, knees bent open and spread wide so Marrok had easy access to all parts of him. His hands were tangled in his own hair as he sought something tangible to grip as he lost his sense to the arousal flooding his veins. A line of slick connected the tip of his cock to his soft tummy. He stared at Marrok with half-lidded eyes as he shook his head.

The Wolf sucked in a deep breath and bit his lip. His touch on Sigourney faltered.

"Innocent little lamb...you found the Wolf's den. I'm going to eat you all up." The tiny spots of gold in his eyes flickered, gleaming in the sunlight streaming in from the window. "Mine to taste. Mine to touch. Mine to devour."

And then, Marrok's head swooped down, engulfing Sigourney's prick in one easy swallow.

The Lamb wailed in pleasure. His body shook as he immediately went over the edge, his brains nearly shooting out of his cock with his first orgasm. He grabbed fistfuls of Marrok's dark hair, and looked down, overwhelmed. The Wolf was fully focused on his task, eyes closed as he savored the flavor on his tongue. Marrok drew back, tongue circling under the blushed pink mushroom, gathering the last bit of musky expressed slick from Sigourney, causing him to gasp.

Tanned hands slid up pale thighs, gripping tightly under Sigourney's knees, and jerked his hips up higher, folding the Lamb further in half. Sigourney's hands came up and he gripped under his knees on instinct. Those eyes, so stark and heated, flared in approval before they stared down the Lamb's most intimate parts.

"I'm going to feast on your cunt, sweet. Then you're going to take my knot like a good little Lamb before I put you over my lap and finger your ass. I want to see how many you can take before you come without me even touching that delicious cock of yours," the Wolf murmured, gazing down at

where his fingers played with the slick staining Sigourney's thighs.

"Yes," Sigourney nearly wailed, drunk on pleasure.

Wolves, Sigourney knew from an anatomy class at the Farm, had testicles. Big, powerful dangly parts that hung down below their cocks. The testicles held the semen that would impregnate a Lamb. Lambs, however, had no such parts. Just under their jutting cocks, they had a slit that opened into a vagina. Marrok was playing with the slit now, running two fingers up and down the lips surrounding the hole. At the end of each slide over the slick-covered parts, the V of his fingers wrapped around Sigourney's softening, tired erection, working to stroke it back to life.

Sigourney dropped his knees but kept them spread wide as he sat up, eager to see Marrok's fingers enter his pussy. The Lamb had played with himself a bit, here and there, but the deep, pulsing arousal he felt in his stomach had never accompanied his play. Now, he was as eager to be sated as he was for the Wolf to drag it out.

There was so much he wanted to experience.

Witnessing the cook and stable boy fuck had made him assume that sex was compulsory. Necessary for breeding, and an exciting way to avoid chores, but the stable hand had seemed so unenthused about the whole process it had made Sigourney worry. Now, though, he knew without a doubt that the partner a person engaged with in intimate acts made a difference.

In Conri's carriage, when Conri had made Sigourney sit right next him and spoke dirty words in his ear, only apprehension and disgust flickered through the Lamb. There had been no hints of arousal.

Nothing like this overwhelming need to mate he was experiencing now.

Marrok was two fingers deep in Sigourney's cunt and the Lamb's head dropped back, mouth wide open as he panted out the Wolf's name on stilted moans. His hips worked against the hand, and he felt his stiffening cock bouncing against his belly with each rock. Sigourney was grunting out in "uh uh uh" breaths. Then, Marrok's fingers crooked up and struck something within him that had the Lamb nearly sobbing.

His face was a mask of anguished pleasure, so overwhelmed and overcome with the sensations flowing through his body. He was torn between jerking his hips away and grinding down deeper, pushing harder against the thick fingers spearing him.

A third finger parted him, stretching him farther. More hot, wet slick gushed out. Sigourney could see that Marrok's hand and wrist were drenched with him.

"Please," Sigourney begged. "Please, just fuck me. I need your knot." He backed his hips away, sliding off the fingers within him, and he turned over onto his stomach. Raising his ass in the air, he dropped his head down, getting it as low as possible, laying his face flat against the bed. He tilted his hips higher and widened his knees, giving himself room to thread his arms between his thighs. Sigourney reached up and spread his cunt wide open; he could feel it clenching and unclenching under the searing, watchful stare of the Wolf.

"Please, Alpha. Knot me. Breed me. Alpha, Alpha, Alpha." The Lamb's voice was shaking with his need.

A fierce growl sounded from behind him before the tearing of cloth lit up the silence. Then, a warm, calloused palm on his rump. It slid down his back and sank into his locks, fisting the fur at the nape of his neck tightly.

"I don't have it in me to be gentle, Lamb," Marrok warned. His voice was a snarl.

"I don't care, I don't care. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me." Sigourney's hips rocked back, tugging

Marrok's dick and getting it wet.

A sudden, harsh slap against his ass made him jolt. "Fuck, *yes*," he moaned.

The Wolf's grip tightened in Sigourney's hair and he felt the other tease his opening.

"Here I come. Gonna split you open, gonna make you come on my knot."

When he felt a broad head pushing against his cunt, Sigourney held his breath. Then, with a slow glide, the Wolf began inching himself in.

"Ohhh, *fuck*, little lamb," the Wolf snarled. "You're so goddamn tight."

Sigourney just keened in response. He could feel his body stretching open, but there was no burn, no pain. He was slick and tight around the Wolf's prick, the slipperiness making for a smooth glide. Marrok's dick just seemed to keep going and going. Inch after inch sunk into Sigourney, and he tilted his hips at a sharper angle, making more room. Finally, he felt the heavy, warm press of balls against his rump and knew the Wolf had bottomed out.

The Lamb panted, relieved and excited in turn. His body could take *so much*.

"Good boy. Such a good boy," the Wolf praised, stroking a hand down Sigourney's flank. Then, that hand reached up and clenched tight to his shoulder. "Brace yourself."

Marrok fucked into Sigourney with unrelenting force. He slammed a hand out, reaching for the headboard, the wall, something to brace against as his body was jerked higher against the bed. His flailing hand struck something and glass shattered, but Sigourney couldn't be bothered to worry. The feel of the cock pounding his cunt was exquisite. His own dick was hard and streaming precum, leaking copious amounts onto the bed.

The Wolf was snarling and growling, near roaring as he pummeled the Lamb's body.

"My knot is coming, little lamb. You're making it swell up so big." Sigourney could feel Marrok adjusting his position and then his hands slid under Sigourney's chest and he heaved the Lamb up, to where he was nearly kneeling on Marrok's lap.

The change in position made Marrok's cock strike a sensitive spot within Sigourney and the Lamb shouted his pleasure. He reached back, bracing himself on Marrok's thighs as he finally caught onto the rhythm and began to bounce.

Marrok released an explosive curse.

"That's it, sweet. Bounce on my cock. Stroke you dick for me. Let me see you." At the purred words, Sigourney reached a shaking hand up and began caressing his own rock-hard prick.

"Almost, almost, almost," he whispered, leaning his head back on Marrok's shoulder. His hips worked hard, muscles straining, thighs burning from use. When a particular hard thrust landed just right, Sigourney's orgasm leapt through his body, nearly whiting out his vision. He sobbed out his enjoyment.

The Wolf's thrusts increased before he let out a howl and then he froze, cock tucked deep, and through the throes of his orgasm, he felt it—the telltale stretching of his rim around a knot. Marrok was groaning against his shoulder, and Sigourney felt his teeth nipping at his neck as the Wolf lost himself to his own orgasm.

They both collapsed to the bed, sweaty and covered in cum and slick.

With a groan, Marrok heaved himself to the side, bringing Sigourney with him as they were still connected, cock to cunt.

The Wolf made a satisfied hum and buried his nose in Sigourney's hair.

Wholly content, Sigourney closed his eyes, ready to drift off for a midday nap. But a sharp nip

against his shoulder jolted him out of his sleepy doze.

“Don’t get too comfortable, little lamb. My knot still craves your ass.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

Want more of Sigourney and Marrok? For an extended, more detailed version of this story, keep your eyes peeled for the full-length version of What Big Teeth, coming this fall. A preorder will be posted at a later date.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Salem Sinclair drinks too much coffee, swears like a sailor, and survives on slasher films and true crime podcasts. She has a full-time desk job on top of being an author + she's the mom of a pretty rad pre-teen.

If you want to keep up with her, your best bet is to follow her on Instagram, where she is most active.



Beware of the woods in the north.

A curse has caused me to live a life of solitude.

I'm a monster. A beast.

Living my days secluded in the dilapidated lighthouse where the bricks crumble into the earth and the sharp vines cling to the stone walls.

Surviving along the rippling cold waters of Lake Superior, in the eerie forest where echoes whisper in the murky air.

No one dares to enter these woods, not when a beast lives within them.

Until she came along.

A young, naïve girl stumbled into the misty forest, oblivious to the monster that lurked in the trees.

She should've known better than to enter my home.

It was foolish of her to not run when she had the chance.

Now, I'll never let her go.

CHAPTER ONE

Poe

Sweat runs down my temples even as the crisp air raises the hair on my arms. My feet punch the ground as my lungs wheeze with the exertion of my sprint.

I can't get caught.

I'm *not* going back there.

I can't tell you how many days I've been on the run. Days upon days of running, my body growing weary while my mind can't stop moving, no matter how heavy my limbs become. It's a vicious cycle, though I'm bound to escape.

Maybe it's only a figment of my imagination, believing the authorities and child protection are right on my heels, but it's not. I've seen the police linger on the highways. I've seen them drive down rural areas almost as much as they patrol the cities. It's not normal, and no one can tell me otherwise.

Why they can't just let me go, I'll never understand. I'm nearly an adult. Seventeen years old and only months away from my foster family kicking me to the curb anyway when I turn eighteen.

I've been hopping foster families since I was in elementary school. My parents ripped away from me and shoved into jail and treatment for the constant use and distribution of methamphetamines. It was only supposed to be temporary, but by the time they left their orange jumpsuit at the door of their jail cells, they were already walking into their halfway house with another couple of grams of meth tucked gently into their pockets. The truth became crystal clear, quite literally.

They love drugs more than they love me.

Child protection stripped their parental rights away permanently. Then they placed me in a foster care home that wasn't terrible, until my foster father passed away unexpectedly five years later. It was then my foster mother couldn't do it by herself and shoved me back to child protection. From there, I hopped foster families until my most recent home.

Tori and James were supposed to be the foster parents that kept me. I told myself time and time again, this is the place I'd stay until I turned eighteen years old. Then I could go to college with some financial aid and figure the rest of my life out.

Life is never that easy.

Tori and James are pieces of shit, and the smiles they gave me when I entered the home didn't translate to behind closed doors. Their only goal is the money they receive from the county for giving me a roof over my head and food in my belly. Other than that, they're controlling dictators, slaving us to do every chore, every errand. Everything imaginable that could be done in and out of the house that benefits them, it's on the kids. They're losers, and the moment Tori shoved my homework into the garbage disposal and yelled at me for not doing the dishes, enough was enough.

I slaved over that homework for hours upon hours, and she threw it away when she could've waited five more minutes and I would've done the dishes.

That's when I'd had enough. I'd packed up all my belongings in my small backpack, taken the small stack of cash from the cookie jar in the living room, and bolted. Though, that wasn't until after I told my younger foster sister, Christine, my plan.

I know, without a doubt, she would've kept my secret. But I'm sure with Tori and James breathing down her neck and demanding, maybe even threatening her, she cracked. Now they're after me, knowing my steps, my intentions.

Why couldn't they just let me go?

Because they're going to lose a kid, which means they'll lose their money.

I can't let them find me. I should've never told Christine my exact plan, but maybe I'd hoped she'd want to come with me. She never would, though. She's too meek, too young. A rule follower that would be terrified of the backlash.

That's okay, I prefer to weather this storm on my own anyway.

My plan is to make it north to Canada. Where there're mountains, and trees, and solitude. Away from the congested, overpopulated city of Minneapolis. Where there's more crime, more guns, more drugs than ever before. What used to be a beautiful, albeit slightly dirty city, it's now to the point I can't even go outside without needing to look over my shoulder.

I've almost made it to the border. I have no idea what I'll be presented with at that point. Will there be border patrol everywhere? But I'm bound and determined to not be found. The trees have grown thick, and I've been trailing along the coast of Superior, where it grows rocky, the earth uneven and sharp. Any slip and fall could mean injury or death. To my right are the dark blue waters of Superior. They are not like the ocean waters. These rippled waves are nearly black, and each crash against the shore is angry. There is no sandy beach. It's just water and rocks. Violent, raging rivers against jagged stones.

I stay in the trees, weaving around branches and stumps and aged life. It's springtime, and it was rather warm in the cities, but up here, it's cool, crisp air that brushes against my skin with the fresh breeze. The air is lighter, the sky clearer.

But then everything changes. The sky grows dark, even though it's midday. The breath between the trees grows murky, hazy. It feels like I step into a different world as a shiver breaks out along my spine. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I see the same darkness I've stepped into, even though I know without a doubt it was light only moments ago.

Turning around, I slow my steps, walking north. Hopefully, by the time I reach the border, I'll no longer have this sinking feeling of dread in my stomach. The worry or the hesitation to go farther. It's like the bright red word danger blares in the back of my mind, and I can't escape it.

I continue walking, ignoring the growing nerves in my throat, my eyes scanning my surroundings, when suddenly, my steps stop, my feet crunching against pine needles and leaves, my eyes widening at the sight in front of me.

A large castle. *Or is it a lighthouse?* It's both magnificent and depressing. It sits along the rock and the trees, slightly hidden and secluded, yet standing as a fortress. The brick at the bottom of the lighthouse is crumbling, molding with the ground and becoming one with the earth. Moss clings around the bottom of the rounded wall exterior. Vines grow upwards, as if they're in a race to get to the top, their long, green arms winding their way around the sides. The top light still works, the flashing circling and reflecting off the surface waters of Superior.

This place is beautiful.

I step toward it, both nervous and excited at my historical find. I want to learn about its history, find some artifacts that I can remember this trip by. For the first time since I left Minneapolis, *I'm excited.*

I take another step, when a flicker of a shadow flashes in the corner of my eye. I glance up at the window to see the foggy glass with a crack going straight down the middle.

What?

As I walk around the side of the building, another flash darts past, and my eyes widen.
Who was that?

CHAPTER TWO

Kai

Solitude.
Silence.

So much different from the life I used to live, yet it's so much more desirable. My life used to be filled with lights, cars, pollution. Always on the move, every minute of every day. I was born mediocre but built my life until I could print stacks of bills and use them as a blanket.

Being the president of Morte Enterprises will give you that ability. The business that accumulated more money than Google, Microsoft, and Amazon combined. I was surrounded by glitz and glamor, and if I wasn't at a meeting, I was at some sort of function or fundraiser.

I was always on the move nonstop.

But with the high life comes the corrupt life, and it was easy for me to step into it without hesitation. What went from being a hardworking man who worked his way to the riches turned into illegal business dealings and having the life taken of anyone who stood in my way. I didn't care. Death didn't matter to me when I had life. I had everything I ever needed, ever wanted.

Until that night.

Coming home from yet another gala to the Morte Condos in Ontario, Canada. The complex had many tenants, but I owned the top four floors. It was my own mansion.

A mysterious man in a black suit followed me throughout the night, and though it didn't bother me, something stood out about him. Something gave me a bad feeling as I talked to guest after guest, with the man standing in the shadows, watching me continuously.

I didn't let it bother me, because after shots of scotch and several bumps of coke later, nothing distracted me except the legs of a brunette in a shiny red dress.

But as the party wound down, the brunette slipped me her number, her red lipstick kissed in the center, along with a promise of a date tomorrow. I stumbled to my condo, and I still felt that shadow hovering over my back. Every glance over my shoulder showed no one, but I knew he was there.

The elevator dinged as it stopped on the twentieth floor, at the main part of my house, and as I staggered into the hallway, there he was. The man in the black suit.

"Who are you?" I growled.

"The real question is, Mr. Morte, *who are you?*" His voice was one that held a danger and a rasp, causing an instant edgy irritation to roll across my skin.

"If you know my fucking name, you shouldn't have to ask."

"I've been watching you for a while now," he mused, relaxed as he stood in the corner of my doorway.

"Why?" I cocked my head to the side as I approached him. I've never taken a life myself. I didn't have the time to do such a thing. Someone always did my dirty work, yet maybe this was the day that all changed. This was the day I'd finally get blood on my hands.

"Because you have been watched for your bad deeds, and it's time you paid the price."

My eyes narrowed. "Who do you work for?"

"I work for the one who fears nothing. Not even God." He stepped out of the shadows, and he was even taller than I thought, like he grew inches with each step. Cloaked in all black, even his face was

indistinguishable. I couldn't make out this man, and with each moment that passed, a sinking dread filled me, overwhelmed my senses. I didn't want to know him.

"Death?" I asked lowly.

He growled, and the air in the hallway chilled.

"What do you want?" I barked.

"You have a choice, Mr. Morte. You have lived your life filled with greed, as many of the wealthy do. But your clock struck twelve, and your time is up. A choice between two evils. You may lose it all; your business, your wealth, everything you've worked so hard to build, gone. Or, you can live with a curse for the rest of your life. The choice is yours."

"A curse?" I snarled.

The shadow nodded.

"Neither," I growled back without hesitation. I moved to step around him, but he grew in width, making it impossible to move past. My fists clenched, and I wanted to rip him to shreds, but something in my gut told me to stay put, keep my distance. That one wrong move would be worse than his ultimatum.

It would mean death.

"What is this curse?" I reconsidered.

He hummed low in his throat, and I clenched my jaw at the sound. Then he stepped toward me, the shadow following his every step. I could never fully see this man, and it was unnerving for someone so threatening to be such an unknown entity.

"It is nothing but a curse. A curse is simply... *a curse*."

His vague response made me want to rage, but I kept my ever-cool composure as I contemplated. This man was probably no one, a loser dud that was simply trying to scare me, even though my conscious told me otherwise. But to play his game, what do I choose? Do I choose to lose it all? All that I've built in five years to become one of the richest men in the world, or do I take a measly curse? Bald head? Acne? What the fuck could this man do to me?

I almost laughed as I barked out, "I'll take the fuckin' curse."

I could see the smile of shining teeth within the black shadow before he stepped toward me in one quick motion. The eyes were gold and catlike as they blinked, and the shadow overtook me, surrounded my every limb until I was absorbed by nothing but blackness. His arm raised, and I couldn't see his hand, but I could feel it, the icy cold as he pressed it against my suit coat and withered his way into my soul.

"*A curse it is.*"

Those were the last words ever spoken to me. I remember nothing but darkness, whether I was knocked unconscious or not, but when I woke, I was in these woods. My new home. What this man didn't tell me is by choosing the curse, I also lost it all. Whatever that thing was, destroyed my life forever.

My memories are scrambling when I hear the crack of a branch, and I frown. Wildlife doesn't come near this area; they can sense the beast that lives in the lighthouse.

I get up from my chair, walking toward the window and glancing outside.

What?

A girl... an actual girl. Her strawberry blonde hair wrapped in a mess on top of her head. She has a sweatshirt tight around her neck, and another wrapped around her waist. A pair of dark jeans mold

around her legs, and an overstuffed black, ratty backpack sits on her back.

I haven't seen a girl, a person, in so very long.

I shift, feeling uneasy, when she glances up at me. I back up, stepping into the shadows as my heart pounds in my chest. *Did she see me?*

I step forward again, across the window, and my eyes widen when I see her still there.

She's real.

And she's looking right at me.

CHAPTER THREE

Poe

W *hat was that? Was that a person in the window?*

Curiosity gets the best of me, and I squeeze the straps of my backpack as I walk toward the lighthouse. I have no clue what would even be in here. Is it a house? A storage facility? Maybe someone came to work in... whatever the hell lighthouse workers do.

Or...

I stop in my tracks, nerves hitting me that maybe it's a police officer.

What if it's the people who are looking for me? Maybe this is just a trap?

My heart thuds in my ears, but rationality tells me it can't be the authorities. I haven't seen a police car in miles, and I'm far enough from the main road that I would have heard them walking through the woods alongside me. I haven't heard anything for hours.

Nothing but the water and my own footsteps.

I walk up to the building, my hands reaching out and brushing along the vines. They're damp, like a light rain has recently fallen. My thumb and forefinger rub against one, soft yet brittle against my skin.

My eyes take in the large steel, ominous against the brick. It's painted a dark gray and chipped along the edges from age. My hand wraps around the knob, and it's oddly somehow warm. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I'm reassured when I see nothing but trees and water. I take a deep breath, turning the knob and stepping inside.

"Wow," I whisper.

It's glorious.

A spiral stairwell sits in front of me and spins so far up I can barely see the top. The windows allow in the natural shaded light, and though everything is outdated, it's in good condition. The stairwell appears to be made of a bronzed steel, the floors a milky tile. From what I can see, it looks like the next floor up is a living area of sorts. This place is huge. It's big on the outside, yes, but it's absolutely massive in here.

I close the door without looking back, in awe of my surroundings, and it's then I hear another set of footsteps behind me. My body freezes in place, and before I can think to move, arms wrap around my waist, lifting me in the air. I let out a scream, but the stranger holds me in a way that I can't turn around and see who it is. From their power and size, though, it must be a man. I instantly start sweating, my entire body quivering with nerves as I'm whisked not upstairs, but down.

"Stop! Please stop!" I cry out, using all my strength to writhe out of his hold. "Please, let me go! I'll leave! I'll go right now!"

I can feel a growl, but I can barely hear it. It vibrates against my back and sounds absolutely menacing, sending a pang of devastating fear through me.

Down the stairs there's barely any light, and my body tenses to stone when I see a cellar of sorts, along with a... *cell? A jail cell?*

"No, no, no, no. NO! NO! Please, no!" I whip my body back and forth, but it's no use against this person's strength. He drops me and I lose my footing, falling to the ground, as he quickly shuts the gate and latches the lock. Standing up on shaky legs, I move closer to the metal bars, and he quickly steps back before I can get a good look at him, retreating into the shadows surrounding us.

He begins to pace, and though the floor is cement down here, I can feel each step he takes as the

force rumbles the ground beneath me. Each pound of his feet ricochets up my legs and through my body.

“Please, let me go,” I cry, tears flowing down my cheeks. “I’m sorry!”

He growls, and it rips from his throat as he continues to stalk back and forth. “I can’t.”

My body snaps up straight, and I widen my eyes. His voice is smooth and silky, an amber liquor as it rolls down your throat. “Why not?”

Faintly, I can see him vehemently shaking his head in the dark shadows. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

I can’t help but whimper as tears flow freely down my face, blurring my vision. My hands that grip the bars slide down and I fall to my knees again, my forehead pushing against the metal. “Please,” I whisper. I can tell he’s stopped moving now, and in the dreadful stillness, suddenly rage overtakes me. “Let me go! Fucking asshole, let me out of here!” Screaming at the top of my lungs, spit flings from my mouth, as I grab the bars again, rocking them with desperation, metal hinges slapping against metal hinges. I refuse to be locked away. I was almost free.

I was so fucking close.

Before I can take a gasping breath of air, he steps forward, his hand slipping between the bars of my cell to wrap his fingers around my throat. He squeezes, pulling me until my face smashes against the cold metal, and my eyes widen, pure terror cooling my blood as I stare at him.

A terrifying man. But not a man.

His hair is cropped short, though slightly messy on the top. Behind his left ear, curling around his jaw and to his cheeks, are dark blue, nearly black scales. They dip down his neck and over his shoulder, down his arm and across his chest, then trail and disappear below his cotton pants. The fingers that wrap around my neck are also covered with scales, rough yet smooth against my skin. I can barely breathe or gasp in a breath at the sight of this... beast.

What is he?

His eye, the one on the side with the scales, is yellow, a thin strip of black through the center. Like a cat, but so much more terrifying.

He’s half man, half beast.

“What are you?” I whisper, tears streaming down my cheeks onto his scaled wrist, and he sneers, his lips pulling back and showing a perfect set of white teeth.

“You shouldn’t have come here. This place is off limits,” he snarls.

“I’ll do anything,” I gasp. “I’ll do anything you want.”

“Anything? How about death.” He squeezes tight, and my breathing cuts off. I can’t gasp in even an inch of air as darkness surrounds my vision.

Just as I believe this is it, that this is the end for me, he drops me to the ground, backing away. He slams the door shut, leaving me alone. In the darkness, by myself.

A hostage.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kai

I stomp outside, my back rippling with rage as my fingers burn.
Who the hell is she? Where did she come from?

She looked at me like I was a monster, a beast. Exactly what I am, but to see that in the eyes of someone makes my blood boil with such absolute rage. I have no choice but to end her, to get rid of her and forget she was ever here.

No one can know about me. What would happen if I was found out? A beast in the woods? I've been in here for years, but I'm not naïve enough to wonder what would happen if a creature like me was found.

Half man, half dragon? Fuck, I'd be the biggest science experiment ever. They'd pick me apart, and I'd never survive.

It's better for me to stay hidden, locked away in the woods where I'll never be discovered. Whatever that man did to me all those years ago, he struck me with a curse that'll keep me secluded for the rest of my life.

In the beginning, I thought I could make my way home, back to my real life. I stayed covered and obscured, but I couldn't do it forever. The moment I stumbled out of the woods and to the closest city, the front page of a local newspaper showed me my worst fear.

Multimillion dollar mogul Kai Morge died in a plane crash. Somehow, this man crashed my plane in the middle of the woods in Canada, with a body so deconstructed it was unrecognizable, but it looked enough like me that they said I had died.

What do I do, walk up to a doctor with scales on my body and say I didn't actually die, that someone cursed me? I'd be moved to a psych ward, then a science lab, and I'd never get out.

No, I can't let this girl leave. She's too young. Someone is bound to come looking for her. Or I'd let her go, and she'll spit to the first person she can see about this monster in the woods. I have to kill her.

Right?

Or... *could I keep her?* Hearing the voice of someone else caused such an earthquake in my chest. To hear such a melodic, light voice was a brightness in these gloomy woods. I could hold her hostage, give her food to keep her alive, but just keep her around because...

No, fuck that.

Absolutely impossible. I have no use for her. For a child. It's been so long since I've been around a female. So long since I've been intimate. It doesn't matter, though, because I'm a fucking monster, and even if I kept her as a hostage, she would never be with someone like me.

A beast.

CHAPTER FIVE

Poe

My back sits against the brick walls, my entire body trembling with fear. What am I supposed to do now?

What is he? Where did he come from? Does he have some disease and is hiding? Or is it something else?

There is no way for me to escape this basement. I'm completely locked in here, trapped and secured behind these metal bars. The only way I'll be able to leave is if he allows me to.

He tried to kill me.

My breath puffs out of my chest on a shaky exhale, and I don't know whether I should cry, scream, or beg for help. Or maybe I should laugh.

Which place is better to live? With my evil foster parents or with this beast that hides in the forest?

A shiver rolls down my spine, and I curl my arms around my knees and bow my head between my thighs, taking deep, nervous inhales.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

Just as another sob rattles through my ribcage, the sound of feet pounding down the stairs makes my body snap against the wall behind me. I shuffle back as if I can sink into the brick and disappear. I don't know how to react, I have nowhere to go. I'm trapped and at this man's mercy.

Suddenly, the door slams open, banging against the wall. There he stands, in the shadow, his chest heaving, his eyes glowing. One is a bright blue, one is yellow. He watches me, the heat of his stare burning into my body. His eyes are like a fire, and my skin heats, a trickle of sweat trailing down my spine.

I push myself to a stand, remaining against the wall as his eyes continue to lock with mine. This encounter is much different than the last. There is something... unsettling about him.

He steps forward, stalking out of the shadows and toward the cage. He doesn't say anything as he unlatches the lock, stepping into the cage with me. My palms flatten against the wall behind me as he steps toward me.

Again, and again, *and again.*

Until he's only steps from me, his top half without a shirt and his bottom half in a pair of thin cotton pants. Where is this man from? The pants look threadbare, barely able to hang onto his hips. From a different time period. Isn't he cold? With his chest and back bare? It's cold down here, yet it's only heat that emanates from his body. Like he's feverish. It makes me want to curl into him instead of away from him, but he terrifies me, so I stay right where I am.

He takes another step, and then he's against me, his heat molding against mine. His leg presses between my thighs, his body pinning mine from hips to chest. He growls, his hand raising, his fingers curling around my slender neck. He squeezes tight, tilting my face up until my eyes clash with his. They spear mine with a look of such intensity that I gasp in the only ounce of breath left in my lungs.

An animalistic growl rolls through his chest and rips from his throat. He says nothing, but his eyes speak so many words. He's angry at me, furious, and wants to murder me where I stand.

But with his anger is a need, a palpable one, and my hand raises from the wall, wrapping around the scaly skin of his muscular arm. My fingers dig into the scales, feeling both hard and smooth, yet also rough and sharp against the pads of my fingers. His skin twitches, as if touch is so seemingly

unnatural to this beast of a man. And maybe it is.

How long has it been since he's felt human touch? How old is he? How long has he been out here?

I have so many questions, but they all flutter from my mind and get lost in this cellar as he presses against me even more, and I can feel the hardness between his legs.

I'm not naïve. Living in foster care my entire life, I've been down this road. I've had a few romps in the sack with other troubled guys, some who fumbled their way toward orgasm and others who knew each button to push.

None of them have been like this man. Powerful, controlling, demanding. He knows each part of his body, and from the way he stares down at me as he slides himself against me, I believe he knows the way around a woman's body, as well.

My eyes flutter as he hits that spot between my legs, and I'm terrified at how good it feels. I drop my eyes, not able to look at him when pleasure hits. I don't want to like anything about him. He's a monster, a captor. I don't know what he wants from me, but my fear, his anger, it all turns him on as his cock grows to steel between his legs. He rubs against me, pressing harder, grinding faster, grunting louder.

His fingers twitch, and he growls as he shoves my gaze back to him. His lids are heavy, and he blinks, his blue eye and his yellow eye such a contradiction to each other.

My lips separate, and his eyes drop to them, his lip curling around his teeth as he snarls at me.

He's so hard.

His thigh pinned between my legs rubs back and forth as he searches for his own release, yet works me toward mine at the same time. He bends down, and my eyes widen as I think he's going to kiss me. He doesn't, though. Instead, his yellow eye glows orange, his body turning hot, his skin searing against mine as he tenses.

He grunts, letting out a growl that is so not man, and so much beast. His thigh twitches, hitting that very spot against my clit that makes me see stars. I choke out a whimper, my body weakening, and I start to fall. He catches me, pushing me back up against the wall with his unrelenting grip.

My fingers dig into his scaly arm, and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

This strange beastly man is giving me the best orgasm of my life, and he barely touched me.

He waits until I settle before his fingers peel from my neck, one by one. My gaze clears, and I look up at him, seeing his gaze shuttered as a cold emptiness stares into me.

Then his body is released from mine as he takes a step back. He moves out of the cell, and I sprint forward, just as he slams the door closed and locks me back in.

"Wait!" I cry out, slapping my palms against the bars, letting them rattle together. "Please! Don't go!" I shout at him.

His back is to me, rippling, almost completely full of scales. The dark blue is magnificent, absolutely beautiful, yet also petrifying. How is he like this? What happened to him?

"Please! Don't leave me alone down here! I'm scared! Please!" My voice cracks as I say the words, and he tenses, pausing in his step.

"Will you help me?" I whisper, tears brimming in my eyes.

He glances at me over his shoulder, the scaly side of his face showing, his yellow eye staring me in the eye. "No," he says, empty of all emotion, before taking the final step out of the room, and shutting the door once again.

Leaving me alone.

CHAPTER SIX

Kai

N o.
Fuck no.
Absolutely not.

My feet pound against the stairs as I make my way up the spiral staircase. I head to my room, the ample sunlight from the windows from each direction basking the space in a white light. The house is outdated, though I've been able to make small updates here and there. When needed, I make my way into town at night and find supplies, gathering enough to make some improvements, whether it be to the floors, the kitchen or bathrooms, or even the windows. I do what I can with the limitations of not being able to waltz into town like everyone else.

It doesn't really matter. No one comes here anyway.

Until her.

A snarl rips from my throat as I turn toward the large mirror against the wall. My hair sits in disarray on top of my head, as evidence of my momentary lapse of sanity from when I saw the girl. The scales trail from the side of my head and neck, down over my shoulders, extending down my chest and stomach and slipping beneath the waistband of my jeans. They seem to glow a brighter blue than I've ever seen. The skin that is showing is bright red, burning hot, like I'm feverish.

My chest and stomach heave with exertion, my cock still pressing against the seam of my thin cotton pants, a dark wet spot on the faded fabric. The pants are old and not mine. Whoever lived or inhabited this place before I did dressed for comfort instead of style. These are easier, more lightweight against my scales. Wearing jeans with them is a bitch and not something I'm ever interested in doing.

I snarl against the cum stain on my pants, ripping them down my thighs and tossing them aside. My thighs are thick and corded with tension.

I should've killed her.

That was always my intent. I wanted to go down there and give her mercy while saving myself from having to deal with her another moment.

But one glance at her and all thoughts were swept away. The way she looked at me like she wanted me to save her yet couldn't escape me quick enough. I was both a beast and her savior. I stepped into that cell and wanted to wrap my hands around her throat and kill her.

But her scent. Flowers and a virtuous purity that I craved to capture and inhale deeper. It burnt my nose, and I hated it but couldn't get enough.

I growl as I turn away from the mirror and stalk into my ensuite bathroom. I head to the shower, stepping under the faucet and turning the knob. The water groans as it rushes through the pipes before it releases hot water onto my head.

My skin burns, my scales and body not liking hot water as much as it used to. Since I was cursed, my body has only enjoyed the cool. Cold water, crisp air. It doesn't tolerate heat.

Which must be why my skin burned where she lay her hand. My skin twitched, my scales searing like she was made of flames.

I should kill her. I really should. Right? It would be the most humane thing to do. I can't trap her in my basement and keep her as my fucking pet, no matter how badly I want to. I should just put her out

of her misery. I could see the pain, the longing in her eyes.

She's troubled. Disturbed, yet an innocence lies in her gaze. She's pure. Young.

Too young.

I swallow down the groan that builds in my throat, letting the water pelt against my skin, rushing through my hair and down my face and shoulders. I wash away her scent, though I'll never get her feminine whimpers out of my head. They've entwined themselves in my brain and taken hold against the fibers. Her small pants, her hot skin, the way her fingers clutched against my wrist. She didn't cringe, didn't curl away in disgust.

She gripped me harder.

I can feel my cock grow again, and I frown as I grab it, giving it one tight stroke. My eyes roll in the back of my head as I give the skin another tug, and another. It hardens until it's steel in my palm, thumping and tensing against my hand, begging for another release.

What is this girl doing to me?

My ass tenses as my hips jack into my palm, my grip firm as I watch the head of my cock grow a dark, angry red. It wants between her legs, not my pathetic fingers, but this will have to do.

I speed up my strokes, until the sound of the water squeaks between against my palm, the slap of skin loud in the small bathroom.

It's the sound of her screaming in the basement that has me spurting white ropes of semen onto the bottom of the shower, over my toes and running down the drain.

My heart pounds in my ears as I rip the curtain back and listen to her melodic voice crack under pressure.

"Help me!"

"Please let me out!"

"I'm hungry!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Can you get me something to drink?"

"I'm scared!"

I growl, slapping the knob and turning it off before stepping out of the shower. I grab the towel hanging over the rod, pulling it down and wrapping it around my waist. Water drips from my hair and down my body as I stomp through my room and down the stairs, leaving wet footprints with each step.

Heading to the kitchen, I snatch the stale loaf of bread I found in town last week, grabbing a slice with my dripping wet hands and continuing my way downstairs toward the cellar.

My hand pounds against the door, and I get rid of the last barrier between me and her. She stands there, pressed against the bars, her fingers wrapped around them until the tips are pale white. Tears rush down her face, dampening her knuckles, the black makeup from around her eyes creating a trail of unwelcome darkness down her creamy cheeks.

Stepping toward her, I watch as her lips wobble, fear and hesitation in her body language, yet her eyes suction to my body and trail across each inch, heating my skin once again. The heat becomes so much, the water against my skin dries.

I ignore her stare, my bare feet pressing against the cement as I approach her. My fingers slip through the bars, brushing against her skin. She shudders, her eyes lowering slightly.

I drop the bread.

"Food."

She doesn't look at the food, keeping her eyes on me.

I step away, backing out of the room. She whimpers, and I bite my tongue so I don't speak the words I want to. So I don't question and interrogate like I so badly desire.

"Please help me," she whispers.

I turn around. Just as I'm about to shut the door, she speaks again.

"Just kill me. It's not like I have anywhere to go. It's not like anyone would miss me anyway."

Glancing at her over my shoulder, I watch her step to the side, her feet squishing the piece of bread I brought her. Another tear floods down her face, and I clench my jaw.

"You would be doing both of us a favor."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Poe

Fuck. *What am I doing?*

Obviously, I don't want to die. Clearly, I don't want to meet death in the middle of nowhere at the hands of some beast-man.

But my words slipped out of me without thought. Am I baiting him? Do I hope he lets me free, puts down his guard? Of course.

But a part of my chest aches with truth at my words. I have nowhere to go. I have no one to see. I'm running on empty with very little in my backpack, with no actual destination in mind.

I'm no one. And I've got nothing.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he snaps at me, turning back around until he faces me. His fingers grip the ends of the towel cinched around his waist so tightly, the fabric completely strangled in his grip.

I say nothing, my lips pressing together in a thin line.

"Tell me what you mean," he growls, stepping even closer to me. Too close.

I take a step back, but he's quick, and with one more step forward, he's against the metal, his chest flush with the steel, his hand slinking between the bars. He grabs onto my hair, his fingers threading in the messy strands and pulling tight. "Tell me what the fuck you meant."

He pulls me forward until my cheek smooshes against the bars, his breath fanning across my face. His left eye glows a bright yellow, the dragon-like pupil dilating as he stares at me. His scales ripple as he watches me closely, my lips trembling.

"I have no family. I have no one. I just wanted to get to Canada."

"Why Canada?" he hums.

"Because my foster family are pieces of shit and I want to get away from them," I growl, but a tear sneaks out too.

He narrows his eyes. "Where are your parents?"

I shrug in his hold, feeling the scales against his forearm brush against my cheek. "On the street. In jail. Dead. I don't really know."

He puffs out a breath of air, and it's hot as it blows against my cheek. Suddenly, he steps back, releasing my hair as he stalks toward the door. His hand falls to the knob, ready to lock me in the darkness once again, when he stops at the last moment, glancing at me over his shoulder, his yellow eye burning with aggression.

He whips back around, unlatching the gate and reaching inside. His fingers grip around my arms, and he pulls me out of the cell, yanking me toward the stairs.

"Whoa, what're you doing?" I shriek, stumbling in his hold. He lifts me until my feet barely touch the ground, his excessive strength making my body tense. "Stop! I can walk!"

He doesn't listen, making his way to the stairs and pulling me through the front door. Night has set in the woods, and I can barely see a thing. It's pitch black, yet I can hear the water as it crashes against the rocks. It smells like sand and water, mixed with pine and wood.

He walks out of the house, and the light on top flashes around, basking us in a bright glow before disappearing again. Back to complete darkness.

He drops me onto the ground, and I wince as pine needles poke my hands and feet and stab through

my pants. Then he tosses my backpack at my feet as he steps away, his body falling into the light for a moment before it goes completely black again.

“Go. Get out of here, kid.” His voice rumbles in the darkness, and it sends a shock straight to my chest.

This is what I wanted, right?

But now that I sit here in the dark, in the cold, I have no idea where I’m supposed to go. Or what I’m supposed to do.

I can hear the sound of his footsteps retreating, and I shuffle forward, reaching for his ankle. It connects with air, though, and I whimper.

“Wait, please.”

His stops midstep, and the light flickers on him again. He stares at me, the light reflecting off his scales beautifully, his eyes so wild as his gaze connects with mine.

“I don’t have anywhere to go,” I whisper, defeated.

He shakes his head, like I’m disappointing him. “Anywhere but here.”

I stay where I am, my hands gripping the earth, dirt embedding beneath my nails.

“Go,” he growls, stepping toward me.

I stare at him.

He takes another step, just as the light reflects on him again. He looks massive, and his eye glows red, the scales on his body looking sharp and dangerous, lethal against his skin.

He is truly a monster.

“Get the fuck out of here!” he roars, his mouth turning red too as flames burn in the back of his throat.

My eyes widen to saucers, and I grab my bag at my feet, leaping to a stand and running away.

From him.

To nowhere.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kai

It's been hours.

The night falls away, and the beginnings of a new day begin to rise. I haven't slept a minute, haven't so much as laid down in my bed. I've been awake, sitting in front of my fire and listening to the cracking of wood as I stare out the window.

Where is she now?

Another glance outside shows nothing but water and forest.

Hopefully she's long gone, and she never thinks about the beast in the woods again.

I slink down in my chair, my towel swapped out for another pair of cotton pants. No shirt, as per usual.

Leaning my head against the back headrest, I close my eyes as the fire begins to burn out. The window is cracked, and the morning breeze filters through, bringing the scent of forest with it. It settles me, and exhaustion finally begins to creep into my bones. The worn leather chair scratches against my back, but it doesn't stop sleep from pulling me under.

Snap.

My eyes fly open, the sound of a branch snapping pulling me from my daze. I sit up in the chair, leaning forward and glancing out the window.

Her.

She sits on a big rock, curling up against a tree. Scrunching her legs into her chest, wrapping her arms around her legs, she rests her chin on her knees. Then she looks at the water, looking lost and a little sad.

I can't keep my eyes off her as the sun comes up, casting a glow over her strawberry blonde hair, warming her skin and brushing against her creamy cheeks.

She watches the water aimlessly, with not a care or purpose in the world. She seems trapped in her thoughts.

My feet move of their own accord, standing up and heading down the stairs. I walk outside and head toward her. She doesn't turn around as I approach, keeping her back to me and her gaze on the morning light reflecting on the water.

Then I'm right behind her, the heat from her body warming my chest. I say nothing, watching the water with her. It isn't until she turns around to face me, seconds, minutes, hell, maybe even hours later, when I finally speak.

"You should be scared," I mumble.

"I'm not," she says softly, her body deflating with her words. "I'm scared of the world. I'm scared of what's beyond these trees. What's waiting for me around every corner in the city." Her eyes are piercing, lethal as they stare up at me. My fists clench tightly as I grind my teeth, hating her words but so desperate for them. "But you? I'm not scared of you."

I raise my arm, full of scales, full of a curse I never wanted. Riddled with death and loneliness and spite. "I'm a monster. It would take nothing for me to tear you to pieces. Before you even blink." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I'm on her in an instant, bending her over the rock until her back arches. Her hair splays to the ground, becoming tangled in twigs and dirt. "I could snap your neck. Maybe drain your blood." I squeeze, and her reddened cheeks swell with anger. "Or maybe I'd prefer

to feast on you. I'm sure you taste delicious. Do you taste sweet, little one?"

I let go of her neck, stepping back and holding my arms out at my sides. "Are you scared of me yet?"

She narrows her eyes. "Nope."

My body tenses, and my back ripples, my body morphing as a set of wings breaks from my shoulders and spread wide.

Her body stills, her eyes widening as she takes in the sight in front of her. She slides off the rock, coming to stand in front of me. Every muscle is locked tight at the sight of her coming closer, but I allow my arms to stay extended, my wings hovering behind me and shining under the sunlight. Black and whiny, with a tint of blue. I'm a monster, a beast in the forest. The nightmare no one speaks of. I don't want to be this way, but here I am. People should be scared, not look upon me like she is.

Curious. Intrigued.

Like she wants to know more.

"Be scared of me. Go. Go now. While you have the ability to."

"No," she says softly, stepping around me. Her fingertips brush my wings, both leathery and smooth. Both strong and delicate. I'm not complete, I have flaws. Small injuries have torn and put holes in my wings, scratches and scars from learning how to fly, to adapting to my environment.

"You won't survive here, with me. You will die. Maybe I'll be the one to kill you."

I can feel her shrug from behind. "I could just as easily die out there, trying to survive by myself."

My wings fall to my waist, and I whip around, glaring at her. "I don't fucking want you here!" I roar at her, my eyes glowing, my scales sharpening along my skin.

Her body tenses in fear, though she stands her ground.

I've had enough. My wings crackle as they raise, and I turn away from her, racing toward the water and jumping in the air, my wings flapping as they take me away from the strange girl. Because I can't look at her another moment. I can't smell her floral scent or watch her blue eyes stare at me.

I need to get away. So I do.

And I just... *fly*.

CHAPTER NINE

Poe

I watch him fly away in the distance, his pants forgotten on the ground as he disappears into the sky. His skin shines in the morning sunrise, reflecting off the yellow sun and casting a shadow over the waters of Lake Superior. I walk over to the edge of the water, feeling a mist from the waves hitting the rocks, caressing my face.

He eventually disappears from my view, and I settle onto the ground, peeling off my boots and socks, dipping my toes in the water.

“Holy shit.” My feet snap back at the shocking cold. Literal ice cubes would feel warmer against my skin than this water does.

My hands settle into the dirt behind me as I lean back, admiring the glittering specks from the sun bouncing off the water. It takes a while before the dark figure in the sky reappears, and I keep my eyes on him as he nears, growing larger with each passing second.

He soon casts a shadow over my head, and I tilt my head back as he lowers right behind me. Dust plumes up around my body, and I wave my hand and turn around, watching as he trembles and vibrates, his wings molding back to his body.

He takes a step toward me, and I stay where I am, his eyes tilting down as he stares at me. He does nothing besides watch me, and I can feel the heat of his stare burning into me. I move to stand, brushing my hands on my thighs. “That was... really cool.”

He tilts his head to the side. “*Really cool* is the last thing I’d call it. I was hoping you’d be gone by now.”

“I have nowhere to go,” I tell him honestly. I don’t know where I’d go, and even though I don’t know why I’d want to stay here, there’s something about this man, about this land, that draws me in. It was my full intention to run for my life the moment I was capable, but as he set me free, I was hit with an immense amount of fear. More fear than I had felt when locked away as his hostage.

Maybe it was because just for a moment, I was safe. In that cell, I was hidden from my foster parents, out of the cold, and just... alone. I didn’t have to worry about endless tasks or needing to impress anyone. I could just be me.

Around this strange man, I can be myself without fear or backlash or feeling guilty.

I want to blame it on the fresh air, the scent of the pine trees, or maybe the sound of the water. But I would be lying to myself.

It’s him.

The way he stares at me like he doesn’t just see me. He doesn’t only see my exterior, the shell I’ve encased around myself so solidly, nothing could penetrate the wall I’ve built.

Except him. He sees beneath it, through it, around it, and inside it. He doesn’t care who I am, or where I’ve come from, or who I’m meant to be.

He is fractured, and I am too, and together, maybe we can be whole.

Suddenly, he stalks toward me, and I take a step back, and another, and even another, until my back hits a large pine tree behind me.

The bark digs into my back, and I whimper as my skin grows raw against the roughness. He comes closer until he’s only inches away, his fingers wrapping around the tree on each side of my head, caging me in. Fresh air, water, and pine fill my senses. He smells of the forest, and I inhale deeply,

wanting to savor each ounce of his air I can.

He's naked, not even phased by the cool air. With his heated body pressing into mine, I can feel his erection between my thighs. Thick and corded, burning my hips as they hold me in place, and I melt against the tree, against him, swallowing down my whimper as an unwanted moan works its way up my throat.

"If you don't run now, you'll never have the chance again," he mumbles, leaning in until his lips brush the shell of my ear, the tickle of his breath making me shiver.

I shake my head, my cheek brushing against his rough scales. "I told you... I have nowhere to go." It's the truth, and each time I say it, the words hurt a little less. I don't mind not having a destination anymore. I think where I am is exactly where I'm meant to be.

"I don't do gentle. It's not a possibility you'll be hurt, it's a certainty."

He's trying to scare me. To warn me away, make me want to run for my life, flee from here and never return.

His head lifts, and I stare at his eyes, one bright blue, one yellow. Both mixed with anger and frustration, and heat. He wants to tear me apart. He wants to obliterate me.

"Bruise me, then," I say, my voice steady. Certain. Taunting, with the same heat reflecting in my gaze.

He narrows his eyes, his lip curling back until he's sneering at me. "You're making a mistake."

I ignore the large butterflies flapping against my belly as I press up on my tiptoes, my fingers reaching up until they press into his bared chest. One hand settles against smooth skin, a heat burning through my palm. My other hand presses against hard scales, sharp, smooth, a little jagged as they dig into my skin.

"If you're a mistake, it'll be my favorite one."

He growls, deep in his throat, before bending down, suctioning his lips over mine. I gasp, my lips separating, and his tongue instantly dips into my mouth. His teeth are sharp against my lips, shredding my skin with each nip and lick. His lips are soft, plush against mine, and I can't get enough. My body turns to fire, and my skin begins to dampen.

He bends down, his hands hooking behind my thighs and lifting me in the air effortlessly. He pins me with his hips against the tree, and I instinctively wrap my legs around his waist, grinding myself into him. I feel wanton, out of this world, more turned on than I ever have been in my entire life.

"Needy," he rasps against my lips. With his hands cinching around my waists, his grip tightens, and I wiggle in his hold. I feel his fingers dip beneath my shirt, brushing against the sensitive skin of my waist. His palms are rough, hot, possessive as they explore me. His hips push into me even harder, and my vision fades as he grinds against my clit.

"Are you legal?" he murmurs, pushing me back so my spine is flush with the tree as he separates from my lips. I'm about to complain when his hand goes to the hem of my sweatshirt, and he begins pulling it over my head. I lift my arms, and he tosses it aside, the cool air ghosting over my bare chest.

His hands go to the waistband of my pants next, but he pauses, still waiting for my answer, looking me in the eyes. "What's your age?" he asks, his voice sharp.

"Eighteen," I lie, but does it really matter? No one will say anything out in the woods, and I'm only months away from turning eighteen, anyway. I might as well be. I'm on my own.

"Liar," he snarls, ripping my pants down my thighs. "Fortunately for you, or perhaps unfortunately,

I want inside your pussy more than I care about being a decent man.”

My skin blushes, and he tears my pants from my ankles, and then I’m completely naked for him. “You have an innocence in your eyes, but also a hardness. I’m going to take a wild guess and say you aren’t a virgin?” His palm goes between my legs, his eyes flaring as he touches heat. He runs his tongue along his teeth, his yellow eye flaring and glowing orange.

“Is it any of your business?” I snap, though my tone holds no heat. I’m putty in his possessive hands, and I want nothing but to melt into his hold. The way he touches me, looks at me, moves me how he wants me, he will completely tear me in two. I’m certain of it. And much too ready.

“Let me tell you something.” He steps forward until our naked bodies are flush, his form towering over me. His lips go to my ear, and he whispers, “I’m never letting you leave.”

I snap my head back, looking at him with wide, challenging eyes. Defiance runs through my veins. “Maybe I don’t want to be a captive.”

He smiles, his sharp teeth reflecting off the sun. His eyes glow, as do the scales on his skin. “You had your chance, baby girl.” His smile drops, and he stares at me blankly, seriously. With finality. “Time’s up.”

He pounces, lifting me in the air and slamming me back up against the tree. His hands grip my waist, then my hips, his fingers bruising my flesh with each touch. I can feel him molding against me, becoming one with my body. His arm wraps around me, curling under my ass and dipping between my legs from behind, finding drenched folds and wet heat. I choke out a groan, my head falling against his shoulder, my lips against his neck. I run my lips along the scales, the dark blue glowing, warm against my lips.

His fingers thrust in and out, the slapping of skin against wetness sounding in the air. I start to grind on his hand, and his thumb moves forward, pressing against my clit. My head tilts back, my face toward the sky as I chase another orgasm from this strange man. This monster.

It comes quickly, harshly, ripping through my muscles like a shockwave that I can’t control. My screams echo into the woods surrounding us, sweat rolling down my temples as he continues rubbing against my clit, his fingers pistoning inside my soaked sex, drawing out each bit of arousal as he can.

As I come down from my orgasm, he settles me on the ground. I fall to my knees, my limbs too weak to hold me up. I glance up at him in a daze, watching as he sticks his fingers in his mouth, still glistening from my sex.

My mouth pops open, my face flaming as his eyes heat. “You taste as delicious as you look.” His voice is filled with a rasp, grated over gravel. “Open your mouth wider.”

I do as he says, ready and eager to follow his order, and he butts the head of his cock against my lips. “You’ll have to open your mouth wider than that if you’re going to fit me down your throat.”

I swallow, my jaw working as I pop my lips open again. The smooth, silky skin of his length glides against my throat, and I suction my lips around it, my tongue gliding on the underside as I suck. Hard.

He wraps his fingers in my hair, a low chuckle leaving his throat. “You’re funny.”

I look up at him, confused, his cock still situated against the back of my throat.

I hum, narrowing my eyes. *What?*

“Thinking you had even an ounce of control.”

With that, he pistons his hips back and forth, his cock plunging in and out of my mouth in quick thrusts, making me gag. Each thrust hits the back of my throat, and saliva dribbles from the corner of my mouth, sliding down my chin. He moves forward, continuing his thrusting as he wipes the mess

with his thumb, slipping it between my cheek and his cock. “Swallow every drop.” I moan around him at his menacing tone, clenching my thighs, and he glides his thumb along my teeth before pulling his finger free.

He keeps thrusting until his cock grows to cement, twitching and tensing in my mouth, and I can tell he is nearing release. His hands go to each side of my head, pulling himself from my mouth with a large pop before bending down and grabbing my hips. He flips me over until I’m on my knees, twigs and pine needles digging into my skin. I catch a glimpse of his cock, wet, angry, reddened. So hard. So delicious. My mouth waters at the thought of what he’ll feel like inside me.

He tasted good. Salty. Manly. Just like the rest of his body looks.

He doesn’t waste another second, lining up his cock and sliding inside to the hilt. I can feel him in my belly, and his fingers wrap around my waist, grabbing hold and sliding out before slamming back in. The slap of his balls against my clit sounds, and my eyes roll to the back of my head.

And again.

And again.

And again.

He continues this rhythm, this overwhelming feeling of pleasure overtaking me, and I can’t hold back my whimpers, my cries, my screams into the wild forest air as he fucks me savagely and viciously.

“Holy shit!” I scream, my hand falling forward to the tree as he pounds into me.

He squeezes my hips before flipping me over, my back slamming against the ground, then he slides back in, fucking me, embedding me into the earth.

“You should’ve never stumbled in these woods, but now that you have...” He continues his thrusts until my body is equally as numb as it is flushing with adrenaline. A second orgasm begins to crest, and my mouth opens in a silent gasp. “You’re mine, now.” He slams into me one last time, holding us skin-to-skin as he empties himself inside of me.

“Fuck!” I scream, my body giving out as my second orgasm runs through my limbs. He holds me up, keeping me upright as wave upon wave of euphoria whiplashes against me.

“Fuck!” he echoes, his mouth opening wide and a burning hot flame roaring out of his mouth. My eyes widen as I watch the fire crackle from between his lips before burning out, and he closes his mouth, staring down at me with scorching heat.

My eyes settle, my orgasm giving me a high unlike ever before.

Holy shit.

CHAPTER TEN

Kai

Her heartbeat thumps against her skin, pattering against my fingers. I lift her into my arms, her body limp in my hold as I carry her toward the house. Heading up the stairs, I ignore the sense of unease as I allow the first person ever into my home. She barely stirs, doesn't even take the time to inspect as she relaxes in my hold. Her eyes are barely open as I walk through my room, straight to the bathroom and into the shower.

I settle her on her feet, reaching behind her and turning on the faucet. Hot water sprays down on her, and she jolts before melting into my body, relaxing as the heat pelts against her sore, bruised muscles.

Fingerprints dot along her creamy skin, and my fingers brush them, feeling the urge to create permanent bruises across her flesh. To own her, claim her. I've never wanted to mark a woman before. *Why her?*

Who is this girl? Where did she come from? How old is she really?

"What is your name?" I ask, tilting her head back so I can wet her hair. It's a mess, and from the looks of it, she hasn't had a real shower in days.

"Poe," she moans softly, her eyes closing as the water runs through her strawberry blonde hair. Her eyes pop open, blue orbs staring at me. "What's yours?"

"Kai," I answer simply.

"How old are you?" she asks.

"Twenty-eight. You?" She's silent, but this time I won't allow her to lie to me. "Truth only."

Her lips pucker, and I hold myself back from leaning down and sealing my lips against hers. The act feels like an instinct I have to rein in as the taste of her on my tongue begins to fade. "I'm seventeen." She looks at me, as if I'm going to toss her from my window. "I'm almost eighteen. Might as well be, anyway." She shrugs, nerves still riddling her body.

"What happened to you?" I grab the shampoo, putting a nice sized dollop in my hand before swishing it around, and massaging it into her hair, eliciting another moan.

She shakes her head, her hair full of suds. "Just dealt a shitty hand of cards, I guess. Parents are druggies, shitty foster parents, bad life. I wanted something else. I wanted change."

I hum, not really sure what to make of this jaded seventeen-year-old girl standing naked in my shower. She's clearly old enough to make her own decisions, but am I fucking insane enough to keep her here? If she wants to leave, would I let her go? Maybe.

Probably not.

I find myself liking the company. Using my voice after so long is like coming home. I'm finally not alone.

"What about you?" she asks gently. I stare at her, rinsing out her hair and then grabbing the bar of soap. I don't answer her, waiting for her to elaborate.

"I mean... were you born this way? What... what happened?"

I lift an eyebrow. "You mean, why am I part beast?"

Her cheeks flame at my bluntness.

"Well, yeah."

I debate on how much I should tell her. Whether I should get into the nitty gritty of my life or just

be vague.

I decide on somewhere in between.

“I used to be a wealthy Canadian businessman who got wrapped up in bad dealings. Someone confronted me and I thought it was bullshit. Some druggie or fucking idiot. It wasn’t the case. I woke up in the woods, with scales on my body, and realized I’d never live the same life again.”

“What about family? Don’t they wonder where you are?” she asks softly, a sadness in her tone.

I grind my teeth, so I don’t snap. I don’t want her to feel sorry for me. I felt sorry for myself in the beginning, moping as a heavy depression weighted my limbs, but not anymore. My family is my past. I’m dead to them.

“They think I died. It’s for the best,” I clip out, warning in my tone that I don’t want to broach that topic any further.

“What are you?” she asks after a few beats of silence, her head raising to look at me. She looks beautiful. Wet. Naked. Her hair darker, laying in messy, wet strands down her back. Void of makeup.

“A dragon. Half, I guess.” I did some research after breaking into a small bookstore in town and taking a few books about ancient monsters. The closest animal I was able to relate to was a dracotaur. Half human, half dragon.

One hell of a curse.

“Anything else you can do besides fly, spit fire, and have wild sex?” She smiles up at me, and I lift a brow, this being the first time she’s tried to crack a joke.

“I can kill really well.”

She nibbles on her lip, the plump skin turning white between her teeth. My cock twitches, and she can feel it as it brushes against her abdomen. She glances down, her hand reaching out and gripping the length, giving it a small pull.

“Half man, half monster. Who knew?” She says the words to herself, and I grind my teeth again for some semblance of control as my cock hardens in her hand.

She’s shocked I can give her the pleasure she receives. It’s not me being a monster. I’ve always had women react the way they do. Blown away. Shattered to bits.

But I won’t lie, being a monster gives me an enhanced agility and strength, along with a power and need to destroy everything in my path.

And at this moment, I want to destroy Poe.

I grip her hips, turning her around until her lush, plump ass faces me. I grab a handful, squeezing the muscle, until the skin turns white, and my large handprint makes an appearance on her skin. Her hands lift, pressing against the wall in front of her, perking her ass out a little more.

Crack.

My hand slaps her ass, and she gasps, the shake of her perky flesh making my cock twitch.

Crack.

I slap again, running my tongue along my lips as I watch the skin redden from my touch.

She whimpers, rolling on the balls of her feet. I can tell she’s growing wet, can smell her arousal in the steamy shower. It’s too hot for me, but I tolerate it for her.

She’s becoming an addiction.

Stepping toward her, my cock nudges against her cheeks. She shakes her butt against my hips and lets out a sigh. “Please fuck me again.”

A growl rips from my throat, more monster than human, as I bend down, squatting behind her. “I

will fuck you until you're dripping with my cum, but first, I'm going to make you scream my name." I lean forward, my face going between her soft cheeks, burrowing between her legs.

Her juices drip onto my nose, and my face grows damp as I demolish every inch of her. Sliding my tongue inside her wet opening, her walls clench around me, and her legs begin to tremble with every whimper that escapes her lips. My eyes roll to the back of my head as I suck on her flavor, slurping the juices that are dripping from her. I wrap my hands around her, grabbing onto her breasts, my fingers tugging at her hardened nipples.

She moans, her voice echoing in the shower, making me grow impossibly harder.

My hand falls from her breast, sliding down her slick body and falling between her legs. She's shaved, bare, and I lean back, mumbling against her cushioned cheek. "I hope you weren't shaving for the benefit of anyone else. It'd be a fucking pity for someone to have to die for looking at this pussy."

"Well—" She begins to spit out some bullshit, when I lean forward, my teeth sinking into her cheek and biting.

Hard.

She lets out a squeal, her fingers reaching back and grabbing onto my hair. I release her, diving back between her legs and licking her, fucking her with my tongue while my fingers slide between her folds, finding her swollen, pulsing clit.

I pinch it, feeling her walls once again clamp around my tongue. My fingers begin to rub at her, and she instantly tenses. I can feel her body lock up, close to orgasm, so I speed up my fingers, humming against her lips, the vibrations tumbling her over the edge.

"Fuck! Kai!" she screams, her palm slapping against the wall. Her legs grow weak, and I stand, lining my throbbing cock up and plunging inside her in one quick motion. The walls of her drenched pussy pull my cock in farther, until I'm balls deep and I can barely move.

I grind my teeth together as she reaches back, her hand wrapping around my scaled neck, her back pressing against my chest as she tips her head to look at me. "You're so wrong for me," she moans, the truth spilling from her, pain and honesty in her words.

She's telling the truth.

I'm terrible for her.

I'm a monster. Confined to the caliginous woods where no one dare wander. I'll never give her a real life.

But as I reach my hand around, my blue scaled fingers wrapping around her neck, I squeeze, whispering in her ear. "I'm the worst person in the entire world for you, but I'm never letting you go."

She moans, and her walls flutter, accepting her fate.

I can feel her second orgasm nearing, and I lean down, my lips going to the crook of her neck, my teeth baring as I bite down.

She explodes.

"Kai!"

My fingers grip her hip as I slam into her, water spraying between us in the misty shower as I growl, emptying myself inside of her. Filling her. Claiming her.

She is mine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Poe

The water runs cold, and my body starts to shiver.

Kai and I still lie clutched together, his cock still between my legs. Neither of us has said a word in seconds, minutes. Just breathing in each other's air and being in each other's company.

Life stands still. I want to bask in this moment, and I never want it to end.

Suddenly, Kai's body snaps straight. A darkness covers his features, and his yellow eye darkens, almost reddening.

"What is it?" I whisper, my own body tensing.

"Someone's here."

My eyes widen, and he reaches around me, turning off the shower. He steps out, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around my body tightly. He even tucks the corner under the top fold, and I stand and watch him, the scales on his body darkening, becoming sharper, deadlier.

He grabs another towel for himself, wrapping it around his waist as he turns toward the bedroom. The wings on his back make an appearance, folded gently against his body.

Anger is turning him into more of a beast than a human.

He walks to his window, pulling the curtain back and peeking outside. His body tenses further, if that's even possible, and he takes a step back, turning around to glare at me.

"Why the fuck are the police at my house?"

My eyes widen, my fingers clutching the towel as I gasp.

Shit.

They've found me.

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A.R. Breck lives in Minnesota with her husband, two children and two dogs. Socially introverted and slightly sarcastic, she enjoys watching horror movies and reading romance novels. When she isn't writing, she enjoys road tripping with her husband, two kids, and fur babies around the country. She writes primarily dark and edgy romance books with a touch of suspense. Follow her on social media to stay up to date on new and upcoming releases!

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